Explanations of resilience in women and girls: How applicable to black South African girls?

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Abstract

Our aim in this article is to explore what is known about resilience in women and girls; to theorise how gender-roles are reflected in women's and girls' resilience processes; and to explore how apposite researchers' explanations of resilience are for black South African girls. We[1] conducted a systematic review entailing a qualitative synthesis using relevant qualitative studies focusing on resilience in girls and women of all ages and from diverse cultural groups. Findings from studies that report predominantly on the experiences of Western women suggest that women's and girls' resilience-supporting mechanisms (agency and strength-fostering spirituality) are cultivated through constructive relational contexts that offer emotional and pragmatic support. Gender-roles of interdependence, the physical and emotional caretaking of others, and emotional expressiveness manifest in resilience-supporting mechanisms through complex person-context interactions. However, if the context- and culturally-specific nature of resilience is taken into account, explanations of resilience in black South African girls are limited, and further robust research on the subject is needed.

Keywords

Black girls, gender-roles, girls, positive adjustment, qualitative synthesis

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[1]"Our" and "we" refers to both the first and second author.

In this article we investigate three questions: (i) “How well do researchers understand why and how women and girls from diverse cultures are resilient?” (ii) “How does this understanding offer insight into how gender-specific roles inform resilience in women and girls?” (iii) “How apposite are such explanations to explaining and supporting resilience processes in black girls living in South Africa?”

The definition of resilience necessarily requires two core elements: (1) the person faces risk so significant that it threatens to disrupt culturally aligned normative development; and (2) the person adjusts well to experiences of significant risk (Masten, 2001; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Significant risks include, amongst others, natural disaster, war, terrorism, poverty and under-resourced communities, parental pathology, chronic illness, abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual), neglect, and/or loss of parents or family members (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Yet, in spite of risks such as these, some individuals adjust well (Masten, 2001). Resilience is, therefore, not the same as broader positive psychology concepts such as coping, wellbeing, or post-traumatic growth. Unlike resilience, coping and wellbeing do not require a context of significant risk (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Rutter, 2012). Post-traumatic growth refers to increased positive functioning or growth after experiences of trauma (Tedeshi & Calhoun, 2004). In comparison, resilience could denote recovery from trauma without subsequent growth (Masten, 2014).” Resilience thus refers to positive adaptation (i.e., the process of adjusting well) in the face of potentially devastating odds (Dent & Cameron, 2003; Masten, 2001; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). While the definition of resilience seems relatively straightforward, explaining why and how such positive adaptation takes place is much more challenging (Masten, 2011).

In initial studies of resilience, researchers focused on the personality traits, biological factors, and temperament of individuals as factors that promoted resilience (Ungar, 2011). Subsequently the focus shifted towards exploring how broader systems facilitate processes of resilience. This led to an understanding that resilience processes are facilitated by culture and context-specific transactions between individuals and their social ecology (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2008; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011; Wright & Masten, 2006). According to the Social Ecology of Resilience Theory (SERT) "resilience is predicted by both the capacity of individuals, and the capacity of their social and physical ecologies to facilitate their coping in culturally meaningful ways" (Ungar 2015, p.4). SERT stands in contrast to person-focused explanations of resilience that place responsibility on individuals to be resilient (Masten, 2014). SERT emphasises that resilience-supporting mechanisms are shaped by particular cultures and contexts, and therefore calls for culturally and contextually relevant understandings of such resilience-promoting transactions (Ungar, 2013, 2011). Thus, transactional ecological conceptualisations of resilience now understand resilience as a constructive, culturally aligned person-context exchange (Masten, 2001; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013).

Gender and Resilience

Culturally and contextually meaningful resilience-supporting transactions become more complex when considering gender. Gender refers to the psychological experience of being a boy/man or a girl/woman (Mertens, 2009), which experience is moulded within a child's socio-cultural context (Bem, 1983, 1981; Bradshaw, 2014; Brinkman, Rabenstein, Rosén, & Zimmerman, 2014; Krieger, 2003; Ryle, 2012). Gender Schema Theory suggests that children develop a gender schema, or

framework, through which they perceive and experience the world (Bem, 1983, 1981). This gender schema develops during childhood as children acquire gender identity, and subsequently become aware of and develop gender roles (Bem, 1981; Louw & Louw, 2009; Ryle, 2012).

As with the acquisition of culture, children actively participate in developing gender identity and negotiate how to express their gender identity (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Brinkman et al., 2014; Louw & Louw, 2009; Rogoff, 2003; Ryle, 2012). Children learn gendered ways of being and doing through social interactions that are shaped by specific contexts and cultures at specific points in time (Boyden & Mann, 2005). For instance, Brinkman et al. (2014) in a study with participants who were mostly white boys and girls in the USA (ages 10-13 years) found that gender identity development is a cyclic process of active negotiation between children and their specific sociocultural context. Gendered ways of being and doing are learnt by and taught to children through culturally and contextually-aligned messages from socialisation agents (e.g., parents, adults, peers, media). When children interpret gender roles, they actively decide whether or not to conform to those gender roles by weighing the consequences of non-conforming, which then impacts how they choose to express their gender identity. Consequences of non-conforming might include social exclusion or the disapproval of significant others. As one girl in Brinkman's study noted, it is acceptable for girls to be "boyish" but not for boys to be "girlish" (Brinkman et al., 2014, p.843). In another example, Morrell, Jewkes, Lindegger, and Hamlall (2013) in their review of hegemonic masculinity in South African men explain that masculinity is informed by culture. Thus, gender is a socially constructed, culturally-aligned psychological phenomenon that shapes gender identity and gender roles (Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004).

Potentially, culturally prescribed and/or stereotypical gender roles can also heighten vulnerability in men and women (Dale et al., 2014; Galdi, Maass, & Caldinu, 2014; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010). For girls and women (the focus of this article), dominant, universal stereotypical gender roles include the physical and emotional caretaking of others (Brody et al., 2014; Louw & Louw, 2009; Prentice & Carranza, 2002); maintaining a focus on relationships and being emotionally expressive (Jordan, 2013; 2006; Louw & Louw, 2009); showing submissiveness in romantic relationships and society (Brody et al., 2014); and prioritising the needs of others above one's own (i.e. self-silencing) (Louw & Louw, 2009; Jack & Dill, 1992; Jordan, 2013; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Such traditional roles may place women at risk of sexual assault; intimate partner violence; becoming infected with HIV; negative health outcomes such as diabetes, depression and allostatic overload (i.e. the deterioration of the body's ability to withstand chronic stress); and a lower quality of life (Dale et al., 2015; Hayhurst et al., 2014; Brody et al., 2014). Clearly, the gender stereotype of women as passive and submissive in romantic relationships, and in broader society generally, creates gender inequality and positions women as dutiful to men (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Karatoreos & McEwen, 2013; Thege, 2009; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). It is not the biological sex category that places women at risk, but gender, given the societal status of being a woman (Bradshaw, 2014).

However, there are exceptions where culturally and contextually influenced traditional gender roles empower women. For example, in the face of racial inequality and oppression, African-American women were socialised to be strong enough to take on multiple financial and care burdens (Abrams et al., 2014; Brody et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The sociocultural context that placed women at risk prompted the emergence of the Strong Black Woman Schema, leading to the

characterisation of African-American women as unwaveringly strong (Abrams et al., 2014; Brody et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). On the other hand, the Strong Black Woman Schema may also place African-American women at-risk for physical and mental health conditions (e.g., diabetes, depression) (Brody et al., 2014). Culture and context-specific socialisation messages of staying strong internalised by African-American women had the potential to both promote and constrain their resilience (Abrams et al., 2014).

In her Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) of women and girls' resilience, Jordan (2013) suggests that gender stereotypical behaviours of women, such as maintaining relationships as nurturers and carers, enable women and girls; culturally-aligned positive connections to mutually-supportive others are the keys to their resilience. Jordan explains that women and girls draw strength in positive connections to others and this fosters courage and self-esteem (Jordan, 2008, 2013). RCT is the only theory that we know of that explicitly explains gendered expressions of resilience in women and girls. Potentially, gender stereotyping can derail resilience processes, especially when women internalise negative societal stereotypes about themselves and a societal group to which they belong (e.g., expectations of African-American women to be unwaveringly strong at the cost of their physical and mental health). Resistance to internalising such negative stereotypes is buffered through constructive, mutually growth-fostering connections (Jordan, 2013, 2008). When women and girls are supported to move back into connection their resilience processes are fostered and strengthened (Jordan, 2000, 2006, 2008).

Furthermore, how gender informs resilience, as well as resilience-promoting relationships, will most likely differ across contexts and cultures since gender is an element of culture (Krieger, 2003). However, there is currently inadequate

understanding of how gender roles vary across cultures (Baxendale, Cross, & Johnston, 2012; Hartman, Turner, Daigle, Exum, & Cullen, 2009; Jordan, 2013; Masten & Narayan, 2012). Even less is known about how gender roles and behaviours potentially enable resilience in black South African girls (Phasha, 2010).

The importance of understanding black South African girls' resilience

Various events and stages of the political history of South Africa and, specifically, the experience of apartheid, made black women and girls vulnerable. Both black men and black women are at risk in South Africa, but black girls and black women are most at risk of gender-based violence, unsafe school environments, intimate-partner violence, and face a higher risk of HIV infection and teenage pregnancy (De Lange, Mitchell, & Bhana, 2012; Jewkes & Morell, 2010; Mitchell, 2006; Thege, 2009). Yet sometimes black South African girls are resilient in spite of the adversities they face (Germann, 2005; Malindi, 2014; Phasha, 2014, 2010). For example, Phasha (2010) highlights how black South African girls who had experienced sexual violence adjusted well by investing in their education in order to have a brighter future. However, with only three studies available that explain resilience in black girls (see Germann, 2005; Malindi, 2014; Phasha, 2010), little is known about how and why they are resilient (Phasha, 2014, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how gender informs resilience in black South African girls who face many risks (Phasha, 2014). Understanding how their gendered existence enables these girls' resilience will lead to more effective mental health interventions aimed at supporting their positive adjustment.

Until we understand how women and girls from diverse cultures are resilient, how gender-specific roles potentially inform resilience in women and girls, and how

apposite such explanations are to black South African girls, practitioners and policy makers will struggle to promote girls' resilience optimally, particularly when girls are marginalised (De Lange et al., 2012; Pattman & Bhana, 2006) and embedded in non-Western contexts. To answer these questions, we (the authors) conducted a qualitative synthesis.

METHODOLOGY

Research Method

Following Booth, Carroll, Ilot, Low, and Cooper (2013) and Saini and Shlonsky (2012), we conducted a systematic qualitative synthesis that aims to generate new conceptualizations of phenomena by integrating and interpreting qualitative findings from existing studies. Unlike traditional literature reviews that tend to organize literature so as to support a specific argument, a qualitative synthesis seeks to select high-quality studies, based on clear criteria, in order to answer a specific research question (Saini & Shlonsky, 2012). Our purpose in choosing a systematic qualitative synthesis was to investigate what is currently known about women's and girls' resilience processes, how this reflects gendered pathways of resilience, and how applicable this is to supporting resilience in black South African girls.

This systematic qualitative synthesis involved a rigorous review of qualitative resilience literature from 2000 to 2015, conducted in the period of November 2012 to March 2015, that focused on the resilience processes of women and girls from diverse cultures, followed by a synthesis of the findings of this body of literature (Booth et al., 2013; Saini & Shlonsky, 2012). Quantitative studies were excluded in this synthesis because of the tendency of quantitative measurements to focus on individual processes (e.g. coping) rather than on social-ecological processes of

resilience (Gartland, Bond, Buzwell, & Sawyer, 2011; Tol, Song, & Jordans, 2013), and because many resilience measurements have been conducted with mainly Western participants, without explicit explanation to cross-cultural validation procedures (Luthar, Ciccheti, & Bekker, 2000; Ungar, 2013). Furthermore, measurements do not always account for underlying influences of gender but tend to draw comparisons based on sex categories (Krieger, 2003; Springer, Stellman, & Jordan-Young, 2012). To avoid potential issues of sampling bias and to gain deeper insight into underlying experiences of gender, we deemed a qualitative synthesis to be most appropriate for the purposes of this study.

Search Protocol

Masten (2011) noted that numerous books and articles have been published on resilience across disciplines. Because of this abundance of resilience-focused publications (Hart & Sasso, 2011; Masten, 2011), we searched only for studies published from 2000 to 2015. We conducted a systematic literature search through several databases: EbscoHost, JStor, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, CINHAL, PsychArticles, PsychInfo, ERIC, SAePublications, Google Scholar. The keyword combinations entered were resilience/resilient, positive adjustment or positive adaptation *and* women, girl/s, or female/s. The systematic search through academic databases produced a total of 103 results. Google Scholar produced 23 400 results. However, after screening 1 150 hits, the results from Google Scholar became less focused on resilience processes and we stopped the search. We then screened all the hits from the databases, selecting only studies in which the keywords listed above appeared in the title, abstract, and/or keywords. From this screening process, 102 total matches (n = 102) were considered for inclusion. We then applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria to these.

Our inclusion criteria meant that only peer reviewed articles, book chapters, and dissertations reporting qualitative study findings or qualitative findings as part of mixed methods studies from any geographical context were suitable. Furthermore, only peer reviewed articles, book chapters, and dissertations that defined resilience from a SERT or RCT perspective were included because resilience is no longer considered to be only an individual trait or quality (Masten, 2018). Moreover, resilience is considered in a context of significant adversity (Masten, 2011), and all included studies discussed both the specific context of risk woman and girls faced, and resilience processes that assisted them to adjust well. Person-focused explanations of resilience are not compatible with the theoretical framework of a synthesis of SERT and RCT (Ungar, 2015). Importantly, this means we included studies from a wide ethnocultural spectrum, from varied geographical spaces (e.g., urban and rural), and contexts of risk. The various contexts of adversity included: sexual/physical/emotional abuse or violence (n = 16); poverty and structural disadvantage (n = 8); being HIV positive, suffering from chronic health conditions, and declining health (n = 7); death of a friend/family member (n = 6); political or armed conflict/war (n = 5); substance abuse (n = 4); streetism or homelessness (n = 3); refugee status (n = 3); prostitution (n = 2); adolescent parenting (n = 2); family care responsibilities (n = 2); incarceration (n = 2); racial segregation/discrimination (n = 2); being in foster care (n = 1); caring for orphaned grandchildren (n = 1); and natural disaster (n = 1). Although it might seem counter-intuitive to our argument that resilience is a culturally and contextually sensitive process, we considered this an important starting point for understanding what is collectively known about the resilience processes of women and girls.

We applied four exclusion criteria. First, studies that focused on positive psychology constructs (e.g., thriving (see, for example the study by Hahn, Cichy, Almeida, & Hayley, 2011), coping, post-traumatic growth, and flourishing) were excluded. This criterion was based on not seeing resilience as being synonymous with broad psychology constructs such as coping or wellbeing (Rutter, 2012). Second, studies that reported therapeutic interventions with women aimed at supporting positive adjustment with no findings relating to resilience processes were excluded (e.g. Ley, 2006; Rukema & Simelane, 2013). So, too, were theoretical overviews or literature syntheses relating to resilience (e.g., Visser et al., 2012). Third, studies that reported findings that were not solely focused on women and girls (i.e. that incidentally reported findings about women and girls) were excluded. Fourth, we scrutinsed each study to exclude any duplicates (i.e., studies that reported findings based on the same dataset). After these criteria were applied, 59 studies were excluded, leaving 43 to be quality appraised.

Quality Appraisal

In keeping with Panter-Brick, Burgess, Eggerman, McAllister, Pruett, and Leckman (2014), a quality appraisal is necessary for researchers to rigorously examine which of the identified studies to include in the qualitative synthesis. The tool used in this appraisal was Saini and Shlonsky's (2012) Qualitative Research Quality Checklist (p. 169). This checklist consists of 25 short questions that assess the overall research framework, setting, design, sampling procedures, data collection method, ethical issues, data analysis, and findings of research studies. For example, regarding the research framework the checklist asks: "Is the purpose and research question clearly stated? Is a qualitative approach the most appropriate?" (p. 170). Checklists serve as a guide to assessing the overall quality of the studies that are retained in a

qualitative synthesis, not as a means to further exclude studies (Hughes-Morley, Young, Waheed, Small, & Bower, 2014). We (i.e., both authors) used this checklist independently to assess the quality of the 43 included studies. Following Saldana (2009), we then met and reached consensus on which studies to include and exclude: our suggestions were similar and we were able to reach consensus without disagreements. A further 3 studies were discarded, bringing the total remaining studies to 40 because 2 (i.e., Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Singh, 2009) did not explicate a research design, sampling, methods of data collection, data analysis and findings, and 1 did not include sufficient raw data quotes to demonstrate that interpretations were based on the subjective interpretations of the participants (i.e., Everall, Altrows, & Paulson, 2006). The 40 studies remaining are detailed in Table 1: Studies included in the qualitative synthesis.

Analysis

Following Saini and Shlonsky (2012), after the studies were selected for the synthesis, data were extracted and analysed. The data constituted the findings sections of each study in this synthesis. Data from each findings section consisted of themes, direct quotes, and/or stories reported/reproduced by researchers as recounted by participants. The data were independently analysed by the first author (a Research Psychologist) and the second author (an Educational Psychologist) through inductive content analysis as specified by Creswell (2014), using ATLAS.ti, a PC-based program for qualitative data analysis. Both authors are white South African women interested in understanding resilience among marginalised South African girls. From our own experiences as South African women living in a patriarchal society, we assumed that traditional gender roles do potentially shape

resilience processes, and to limit our subjectivity, we coded the data independently and reached consensus via several discussions.

We conducted inductive content analysis systematically by first reading and re-reading the studies included in this synthesis. We then read the findings sections in each study line by line and analysed the material by coding relevant segments of data, or phrases that related to the first demarcated research question. In other words, to answer the first research question, we coded any words, sentences, or phrases from the data that indicated any potential resilience-enabling processes or resources (e.g., attachment to positive peers; agency; persevering in seeking help, faith in God facilitating meaning-making) in girls and women from diverse cultures. The codes were listed in Atlas.ti, and we then reviewed the codes and refined them into code families. For example, codes that referred to positive attachments (e.g., supportive grandmother, social support from friends, unconditional love from mother) were grouped together to form a code named “positive connections to supportive others”. From these refined codes, the final themes emerged. For example, the code “positive connections to supportive others” was re-examined along with similar codes (e.g. faith in God facilitating meaning-making), to form a main theme of “constructive relational context”.

In order to answer the second research question, we reflected on the main themes that emerged in response to question 1 to understand how they reflect gendered explanations of resilience. We developed a code-list of gender roles based on previous research and theoretical literature. The code-list included: physical and emotional caretaking of others; being emotionally expressive; being interdependent; being submissive in romantic relationships; and prioritising the needs of others (Brody et al., 2014; Jack & Dill, 1992; Jordan, 2013; 2006; Louw & Louw, 2009).

Following Creswell's (2014) deductive content analysis, the codes in the gender role list were then conceptually compared to the resilience mechanisms that had emerged from the coded data. We were attempting to answer the question, did the identified resilient mechanisms reflect female gender roles, or not? Through collaborative discussions, we linked resilience mechanisms to each gender role and resolved disagreements via consensus. Lastly, we explored the applicability of the findings to explaining and supporting resilience in black South African girls to answer the third research question.

Findings

The findings comprise a review of the mechanisms of resilience among women and girls from diverse cultures, followed by comment on how these mechanisms might be gendered.

Mechanisms of Resilience in Girls and Women from Diverse Cultures

In this section, we present the findings to the first research question "How well do researchers understand why and how women and girls from diverse cultures are resilient?"

Inductive content analysis resulted in three main themes that explain how and why some women and girls from diverse cultures adjust well to significant adversity. Such adversities included biological risks and psychosocial hardships (see supplemental information, p. 86). Women and girls adjusted well to adversities because of a constructive relational context that scaffolded agency and spirituality. Resilience-supporting mechanisms of agency and strength-fostering spirituality are

interrelated and nurtured primarily within a constructive relational context. These themes are detailed below.

Constructive Relational Context. Across diverse cultural contexts, why women and girls are resilient is fostered by a constructive relational context. Not one of the studies we included explained processes of resilience in women and girls where there was no report of at least one constructive relational context, even though destructive relational contexts were mentioned in relation to what placed some of the women and girls at risk. This confirms RCT in that what is key to promoting resilience among women and girls, is strength-fostering, mutual relationships that build courage and self-esteem (Jordan, 2006, 2013). In this article, a constructive relational context included positive relationships with human others (e.g. mothers, grandmothers, friends, romantic partners, supportive medical staff, social workers); metaphysical beings (i.e. spiritual deities); and animals (i.e. pets) (see Table 1). Subthemes of a constructive relational context include emotional support; pragmatic support; and expectations of reciprocity. Each of these facets is detailed below.

Emotionally supportive relational context. Emotionally supportive relational contexts were characterised by immediate and continuous support; unconditional acceptance; and a safe space in which women could share experiences and advice.

Immediate, continual support involved family members and friends who listened and offered encouragement and support day or night, without hesitation. The reliable support of friends and family who actively listened prompted positive feelings. For example, the continual availability and encouragement of a foster

mother supported a young African-American teenage mother to adjust well to the responsibilities of teenage parenting (Haight et al., 2009).

Unconditional acceptance involved feeling loved and cared for no matter the circumstances. For instance, a young woman in the UK experienced unconditional acceptance from her parents. This assisted her to adjust well after a miscarriage, and the termination of an abusive romantic relationship (Shepherd et al., 2010).

Unconditional acceptance also involved not being judged or criticised for current circumstances. This produced safe environments in which women were able to discuss their difficulties and circumstances with others. For example, non-judgemental and caring medical staff's provision of encouragement and advice led African-American women prostitutes toward a process of introspection and recovery (Prince, 2008).

Furthermore, opportunities to share experiences with others facilitated expressions of emotion and advice. This further fostered a sense of belonging that women and girls perceived as vital to their recovery (Bryant-Davis, Cooper, Marks, Smith, & Tillman, 2011; Bowland, Biswas, Kyriakakis, & Edmond, 2011; Clarke, 2009; Kinsel, 2004; Prince, 2008; Shepherd et al., 2010). For instance, women participating in church group meetings shared their difficulties with one another, and encouraged one another. Not only were they able to discuss their own difficulties, but at the same time they could learn from others thus uplifting themselves and others through mutual encouragement (Clarke, 2009). Likewise, shared spiritual support through praying for one another and sharing scriptures strengthened women's and girls' spiritual faith, which facilitated their sense of belonging, and meaning-making (i.e., making sense out of difficult situations) (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Bowland et

al., 2011; Clarke, 2009; Kinsel, 2004; Prince, 2008; Shepherd, Reynolds, & Moran, 2010).

Pragmatically supportive relational context. The practical ways in which women and girls were assisted involved physical protection, financial support, assistance with child care, and the provision of basic needs. Being physically protected after having been raped or sexually abused, or while living on the streets restored to them a sense of safety in the world (Bukowski & Beutow, 2010; Brodsky et al., 2011; Phasha, 2010). For instance, after her daughter had been raped, a black South African mother walked her to and from school every day in an attempt to keep her safe from further harm because the rapists continually threatened her at home and at school (Phasha, 2010). A young girl living in rural Indramayu received practical support from her teachers, the researcher, and social workers (Sano, 2012). The social workers and researcher pleaded on her behalf with her parents not to force her into the sex trade, and social workers offered to pay for her schooling.

Financial support assisted women and girls by relieving the burden of poverty and this, in turn, supported their capacity to provide for their families. The financial support often came in the form of work opportunities made possible through friends or family members (Campbell, 2008; Carreón, 2006; Clarke, 2009; Dorfman, Méndez, & Osterhaus, 2009; Sano, 2012). Work opportunities gave rise to the acquisition of skills that potentiated sustained earning opportunities. Financial support from romantic partners relieved girls' and women's financial burden of single parenthood. For example, a romantic partner gave financial support to an African-American teen mother and her children. This helped her to adjust well to being a teenage mother (Haight et al., 2010).

The provision of housing, social security cards, and driving licenses (i.e., basic needs) assisted women refugees and their families after they had left their own war-stricken countries (Brodsky et al., 2011). Other basic needs in the form of food, clothing, and shelter were provided to women and girls in Liberia in the aftermath of the civil war, as well as to women and girls in the USA, New Zealand, and South Africa who were living on the street (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011; Bukowski & Beutow, 2010; Malindi, 2014; Prince, 2008). For instance, social workers provided food, sleeping bags, and safe spaces for adult women living on the street in New Zealand to meet with their probation officers (Bukowski & Beutow, 2010). The provision of food helped these women to steer away from theft in order to survive on the street. In addition, the provision of a safe meeting venue assisted the women to keep appointments with probation officers in compliance with probation regulations, thus helping them to stay out of jail.

Expectations of reciprocity. Women's and girls' resilience was facilitated by relational contexts that not only supported them pragmatically and emotionally, but that also expected emotional and pragmatic support from them in turn. For example, the resilience of older black grandmothers in South Africa, following the death of their children, related in part to the bonds they shared with their grandchildren (Casale, 2010). These bonds meant that they could share their grief and they could process loss. However, these bonds also meant that the grandmothers felt a duty towards their grandchildren, particularly if they were raising them following the death of their parents. As the surviving carers, the grandmothers were expected to provide for the basic needs of their grandchildren. This expectation galvanized resilience-supporting agency that included the grandmothers' cultivating of vegetable gardens, their

obtaining social grants, or doing additional work to supplement income and provide food and education for their grandchildren.

It is important to note that expectations of reciprocity were not destructive, were culturally appropriate, and did not exacerbate risk. For example, a sense of duty to family (i.e., a sense of being compelled to care for family members, particularly children) motivated refugee women from Afghanistan to adjust well to their refugee status in order to provide for their families and children (Brodsky et al., 2011; Brodsky et al., 2012). Likewise, Mexican women who were illegal immigrants in the USA were motivated to adjust well so that their children would have access to a good education and have better futures than would have been possible in Mexico (Campbell, 2008).

Agency. Agentic women and girls did not allow their circumstances to overwhelm them, but actively reached out for help from their social ecologies for support to adjust well in their contexts of risk. Such tenacious action and volition, in the context of supportive others, scaffolded their resilience across ages and cultures.

Agentic women and girls made constructive choices and took action in the midst of potentially devastating adversity. Constructive choices involved acceptance and positive self-regard, and constructive actions involved problem-solving and reaching out to the social ecology for assistance. These sub-themes are detailed below.

Accepting circumstances beyond their control. Acceptance refers to resigning oneself to circumstances over which one has no control (Theron, Theron, & Malindi, 2013). Acceptance promoted positive adjustment in older African-American women who were made vulnerable by circumstances of war (Dorfman, Méndez, & Osterhaus, 2009), older women in South Africa and the Netherlands with

experiences of loss (Bowland et al., 2011; Clarke, 2009), and older women from the US and the Netherlands facing declining health because of old age (Kinsel, 2004; Janssen et al., 2012). With regard to war, acceptance involved tolerating terrifying circumstances of war instead of struggling against them (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Dorfman, Méndez, & Osterhaus, 2009). This was supported by older African American women choosing to engage in positive activities that offered temporary distraction from the war such as, for example, knitting gifts to send to children in other countries who were also suffering the effects of war, and supporting younger community members who had lost their parents; these activities distracted these women from their own circumstances. In another example, acceptance of declining health allowed older women in the US and the Netherlands to maintain a sense of mastery and competence over their day to day lives in spite of their physical ailments (Janssen, Abma, & Van Regenmortel, 2012). Acceptance of declining health was co-encouraged by supportive friends and caring medical staff who provided advice and support in relation to managing physical ailments. This supported a focus on the positive aspects of their lives, leading to these women's maintaining a sense of competence.

In young women and girls acceptance of what could not be altered facilitated focusing on future life goals (Dossa, 2010[2]; Phasha, 2010; Sano, 2012; Shepherd, Reynolds, & Moran, 2010). Instead of struggling against traumatic experiences or, for example, teenage pregnancy, girls focused on what they could control. Mostly, this was building a different future through education, which at times also healed familial relationships, and fostered self-pride. For instance, a young African-

[2] Dossa (2010) was included despite the word "coping" in the title, because the article was about risk, resilience, and coping that facilitates resilience, not solely on coping.

American teenage mother transitioning out of foster care expressed pride in herself for completing high school after giving birth to her first child (Haight et al., 2010). Her acceptance of what she could not change (having been pregnant) and her love for her child prompted education-focused discipline and hope. Instead of struggling against others' negative predictions for her life, she focused on what could be altered.

Problem-solving. In this synthesis, problem-solving involves actively thinking of and implementing solutions to various problems. Girls and women across cultures were resourceful in dealing with financial difficulties (Carreón, 2006; Casale, 2010; Clarke, 2009), and took their time to find solutions to declines in health, the threat of violence, and racial prejudice (Haeri, 2007; Kinsel, 2004; O'Connor, 2002; Van Wormer, Sudduth, & Jackson, 2011). Problem-solving facilitated the reframing of problems as challenges, careful analysis of their particular circumstances, and the development of constructive strategies. Mostly, the motivation to problem-solve came from girls and women needing to care for family members, including children (Casale, 2010; Haeri, 2007; Sano, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2010).

For instance, Clarke (2009) reported how an Afrikaans-speaking South African girl who began working at the age of nine to support her family, chose debt as a way of solving the problem of also supporting her own needs. Because most of her salary was given to her mother, the girl actively solved her problem with the pragmatic support of her boss. She borrowed a small sum of money which allowed her to buy what she needed while she continued to support her mother financially.

Demonstrating positive self-regard. Women and girls demonstrated positive self-regard in spite of negative experiences, such as rape or sexual abuse that was potentially threatening to their self-concept. Positive self-regard included

girls and women having a firm belief in themselves as capable (Phasha, 2010), having love for themselves that scaffolded motivation to achieve life goals (Banyard & Williams, 2005; Shepherd et al., 2010), and feeling positive and self-assured about their appearances and personalities (Bradley & Davino, 2007; Van Rensburg & Barnard, 2005). Positive self-regard was facilitated through constructive relationships with positive role models and constructive others who nurtured such self-appreciation (Banyard & Williams, 2005; Phasha, 2010; Singh, 2009; Singh, Garnett, & Williams, 2013; Van Rensburg & Barnard, 2005). For example, a white woman in the USA who had been previously sexually abused was supported to self-appreciate through her spiritual faith and the support of her family (Banyard & Williams, 2005). Her constructive relational context facilitated her desire to reconnect with, and value, herself.

Strength-Fostering Spirituality. Strength-fostering spirituality refers to spirituality or faith in spiritual beings that prompted motivation in women and girls across cultures. This included a supportive relationship with spiritual beings (God, Allah, the prophet Muhammad), and finding strength and motivation through scriptural readings.

***Strength-fostering spirituality encouraged trust in spiritual beings*.** Across cultures, women made vulnerable by trauma, war, abuse, declining health, prostitution, death of loved ones, homelessness, and substance abuse drew strength from their trust in spiritual beings (in this synthesis, mostly the Christian God).

Trust in spiritual beings fostered positive emotions such as happiness, gratitude, patience, love, and hope, together with the belief that adversities can be overcome (Bowland et al., 2011; Clarke, 2009; Kinsel, 2004; Phasha, 2010). For

instance, an older Canadian woman's preference for gratitude and positive emotions, as encouraged by her faith, outweighed the emotional discomfort of previous abuse (Bowland et al., 2011). When she focused on thanking God (the spiritual being of her choice) for various things in her life, the negative emotions subsided and she was able to gain a new perspective on her life.

Trust in spiritual beings also facilitated meaning-making. Across studies included in this synthesis, girls and women were supported to make meaning because they believed that their spiritual being had a purpose in allowing their hardship to occur. A participant in Clarke's (2009) study said that the notion that "God" had a bigger plan and a purpose fostered a sense of hope that "God" could turn difficulties into "something beautiful" (p. 199). (See also Bryant-Davis et al., 2011; Kinsel, 2004; Leipert & Reutter, 2005; Phasha, 2010).

Scriptures and religious books and poems as a source of strength and encouragement. Scriptures and religious books and poems were found to be a source of strength and encouragement more frequently for adult Christian and Muslim women made vulnerable by trauma and abuse (sexual, emotional, and physical) (Bowland et al., 2011; Clarke, 2009; Haeri, 2007; Moxley, Washington & Calligan, 2012). Religious readings provided a reminder of God's (Christian/Islamic) presence and offered a sense of solace and comfort during difficulties. For example, the popular poem "Footprints" tells the story of how Jesus carries people through difficulties. This poem was a source of strength to older female trauma survivors who felt abandoned after experiencing the trauma (Bowland et al., 2011). In a different study, a Pakistani refugee woman drew strength and comfort from reading the difficulties the Prophet Muhammad faced; she re-evaluated her own difficulties and found the strength to persevere (Haeri, 2007).

Gendered Reflections on the Synthesised Findings

This section answers the second research question "How does this understanding offer insight into how gender-specific roles inform resilience in women and girls?"

In light of these findings it is clear that access to at least one emotionally and pragmatically supportive constructive relational context nurtured resilience-supporting mechanisms (agency and strength-fostering spirituality) in women and girls made vulnerable for various reasons. This was true across all cultural and geographical contexts. Additionally, women's and girls' resilience was cultivated when they were supported to meet expectations of reciprocity.

Reflections on the above findings reveal that dominant universal gender-roles and women's and girls' resilience processes appear to be complexly interrelated. As previously mentioned, dominant universal gender roles typically involve physical and emotional caretaking of others (Brody et al., 2014; Louw & Louw, 2009; Prentice & Carranza, 2002); a focus on relationships and being emotionally expressive (i.e. being interdependent) (Jordan, 2013, 2006; Louw & Louw, 2009); submissiveness in romantic relationships and in society (Brody et al, 2014); and prioritising the needs of others above their own (Louw & Louw, 2009; Jordan, 2013; Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

The gender-roles implicit in the findings of this synthesis are being interdependent; assuming the physical caretaking of family and the emotional caretaking of family and friends; and being emotionally expressive. Being interdependent is fundamental to a pragmatically and emotionally supportive constructive relational context, to agency, and to strength-fostering spirituality. The emotional and/or pragmatic supports of a relational context were intertwined with the

mechanisms of agency and spiritual ways-of-being. The centrality of the value to resilience of women being socialised to be interdependent beings is reflected in there being no accounts of women being agentic, or drawing on spirituality for strength in the absence of some form of connectedness to physical/metaphysical others. Within constructive, inter-dependent spaces, being emotionally expressive (i.e., engaging in mutual communication about experiences, having and expressing feelings, and having and sharing ways of coping) facilitated adjustment. Women and girls apparently gained from their enactment of being socialised to be emotionally expressive (Brody et al., 2014). The physical and emotional caretaking of family and friends offered women and girls the opportunity to reciprocate the emotional and pragmatic support that their interdependent ways-of-being facilitated, but also galvanized constructive actions (such as problem-solving). In this sense, the expectations of women and girls to behave in gender-specific ways in relational contexts, and their acceptance and enactment of these roles, supported their resilience.

However, it is important to point out that the above gender-roles were enacted within a context of mutuality. All the included studies report instances or patterns of girls' and women's caregiving and emotional expressiveness being reciprocated and valued. It should, therefore, not be assumed then that gender-roles would facilitate resilience processes in the absence of reciprocal support. Of some significance, is that this reciprocity was largely with other girls and/or women. Only 11 studies reported men supporting girls and/or women, and then typically in less prominent ways (Fourie & Theron, 2012; Brodsky et al., 2011; Bukowski & Buetow, 2010; Clarke, 2009; Haight et al., 2008; Notter, MacTavish, & Shamah, 2008; O'Connor, 2002; Sano, 2012; Shepherd, Reynolds, & Moran, 2010; Van Wormer, Sudduth, &

Jackson III, 2011). This possibly flags the importance of that notion of the sisterhood of women to the resilience of girls and women.

Some of the major gender roles included in our gender roles code list did not emerge as resilience-fostering processes, including being submissive and prioritizing the needs of others. This raises questions regarding whether these gender-roles did not manifest in resilience processes because, possibly, they inhibit resilience. Further insight is needed regarding how gender-roles potentially enable and constrain resilience processes. In order to understand nuances of how gendered ways of doing and being inform resilience processes, further robust research using sophisticated methodologies is necessary. For example, using multiple methods of data collection and including participatory visual methodologies (e.g., drawings) could uncover rich insights into black South African girls' resilience that might not be revealed through interviews alone (Drew & Guillemin, 2010).

The Applicability of Extant Studies for Explaining and Supporting Black South African Girls' Resilience Processes

The section that follows answers the third research question "How apposite are such explanations to explaining and supporting resilience processes in black girls living in South Africa?"

The above synthesised findings point towards the beginning of an understanding of the complexity of how gender-roles manifest in resilience processes, with particular emphasis on reciprocity and interdependence within constructive relational contexts. As pointed out above, these findings are based on the synthesis of 40 studies that focused on the resilience processes of women and girls from diverse cultures. The majority of these studies (n= 22) focus on the

experiences of women and girls from Western contexts, signifying a dearth of literature explaining the resilience processes of African women and girls. Corey (2009) explains that feminists of colour have criticised existing literature for being an over-generalisation of white Western women's experiences with silence about their own experiences.

The 17 studies that did report resilience in women and girls of colour mostly do not provide insights that explain black South African girls' resilience processes either. Nine focused on African-American women (see Table 1), and of those nine, two explained resilience in African-American adolescent girls (Haight et al., 2009; Johnson, 2010). Two studies focused on African women from Liberia (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011) and Rwanda (Zraly & Nyirazinyoye, 2010), with one study exploring resilience in African adolescent girls from Sierra Leone (Denov & MacLure, 2006), and one study exploring resilience in an orphaned Zimbabwean girl living in a child-headed household (Germann, 2005). A single study explored resilience in Maori women in New Zealand (Bukowski & Beutow, 2010). Eleven of the 14 studies referred to above explain resilience in adult women of colour but resilience processes are developmentally aligned, and change over time and across developmental stages (Masten, 2014). How well young people adjust is often measured in terms of their progress in age-appropriate developmental tasks (Masten, 2014; Shaffer; Coffino, Boelcke-Stennes, & Masten, 2007). Therefore, the experiences of adult women of colour might not be applicable to adolescent girls of colour.

Although four studies explain resilience processes in black girls in America as well as Africa, these studies are not necessarily readily transferable to black South African girls because resilience processes are shaped by specific cultures and

contexts (Ungar, 2011). Not only did these studies involve non South African girls, they included very specific populations of non-South African girls (i.e. teenage mothers, bereaved girls, an orphan living in a child-headed household, and girls who experienced sexual violence during armed conflict) so their resilience processes most likely reflect these specifics (Denov & MacLure, 2006; Germann, 2005; Haight et al., 2010; Johnson, 2010).

Of the three studies conducted with South African women and girls, one focused on South African women (Casale, 2010), and two on black South African adolescent girls (Malindi, 2014; Phasha, 2010). Phasha's (2010) girl-focused study reported a specific facet of resilience—educational resilience. Phasha (2010) provided insight into understanding how the sociocultural values of traditional African culture, such as interrelatedness and *Ubuntu* (i.e., traditional African values that encompass deep respect for religion, among others) shaped how black girls who had experienced sexual violence interpreted their experiences, how they behaved at school, and facilitated their future-directedness and value for education. The value of interrelatedness was evident in how girls sought relational support from others, even those who were not related to them, based on the belief that "the more we are, the stronger we become" (p. 1250). This African value facilitates a sense of belonging and a duty to the collective which promotes resilience. Phasha (2010) explained that black South African girls are traditionally socialised to value their education as a means towards a positive future and bring pride to the collective. The value for education motivated the girls to remain at school and progress in their education in spite of their traumatic experiences. Phasha (2010) also reported that belief in the self assisted the girls to overcome difficult situations, and that the values of *Ubuntu* assisted the girls to forgive their perpetrators and make meaning out of their

experiences. The only other girl-focused study is Malindi (2014) which explored resilience in the context of streetism (i.e., living on the street). Malindi (2014) reported relationships to physical and spiritual others as important for promoting resilience among black girls' living on the street. Constructive relationships included family members (mothers, grandmothers) and access to community-based support assisted the girls pragmatically and emotionally by providing food, facilitating girls' return to school, and by motivating and encouraging girls. In Malindi's (2014) study, the value for education that Phasha (2010) reported is evident in the importance of the girls returning to school. Also, the traditional African value of interrelatedness is prominent in the importance of pragmatically and emotionally supportive relationships that fostered resilience among the girls.

Although the above black girl-specific insights flow from a limited number of studies they are valuable in that they suggest two potential resilience leverage points (i.e., education opportunities and connectedness). Importantly, recent studies with black South African adolescents (i.e., studies that were not specific to black African girls) place emphasis on relationships (and the sense of interconnectedness these relationships provide) and education (and concomitant hopes that education will enable upward life trajectories) (Theron, 2016, 2017; van Breda, 2017). Such repetition suggests that initiatives and policies which facilitate black girls' access to and success in education along with initiatives which enable and sustain black girls to be connected to others are worthwhile starting points for those who wish to champion the resilience of black South African girls.

Despite the aforementioned, we posit that not enough is known about black South African girls' resilience processes to authoritatively explain or meaningfully support their resilience. Therefore, further research is crucial to gain insight into the

resilience processes of black South African girls for their resilience to be promoted and supported effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study was not without limitations. The studies included in this qualitative synthesis were limited to those that contained the words 'resilience/resilient' or 'positive adjustment/adaptation' in the title or key words. This included a language bias since only studies published in English were included. Valuable findings published in other languages may thus have been overlooked. Another limitation was the exclusion of unpublished reports, which may likewise mean that potentially valuable findings were excluded. The selected articles being mostly studies from the USA, Canada, and South Africa and therefore represent a particular voice that might not be as diverse as expected. Additionally, our backgrounds and values may have influenced the results, especially because no inter-rater reliability data were systematically collected on the derivation, inclusion or frequency of codes. Also, the interpretations made in this study are based on interpretations reported in other studies.

Despite the above, this article synthesises relevant literature and in doing so contributes towards a theory that explains resilience processes in women and girls from diverse cultures. It uses this to theorise how gender-roles potentially shape women's and girls' resilience processes. The synthesised findings support SERT (Ungar, 2011) and RCT (Jordan, 2013) in that relationships are key and that women's and girls' resilience processes are promoted through meaningful person-context transactions. Additionally, this synthesis adds insight into how gendered ways of doing and being complexly manifest in resilience processes through

interdependence and reciprocity within constructive relational contexts. Gendered ways of being are evident in the significance of constructive relationships with supportive others in facilitating resilience among women and girls. Expressing emotions within these safe relational spaces also reflects gendered ways of being interdependent, and the reciprocity within these safe relational spaces facilitated resilience. The emotional and pragmatic support that women received, was also reciprocated, and reflects the caretaking of others.

Although this synthesis offers broad insight into women's and girls' resilience processes, given the growing argument for more contextually and culturally related explanations of youth resilience (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2015), rigorous empirical research that makes use of creative, participatory research methods with a wide range of actors in social ecologies is necessary to gain specific insight into resilience in black South African girls. The general account provided in this article needs to be further interrogated and possibly refined. Black South African girls remain at-risk (Moletsane, 2007; Phasha, 2010), and so deeper insight into their resilience is critical for the development of effective interventions to support their positive adjustment.

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[1] We excluded the Strong Black Woman Schema from the list of recurring gender roles. We did so because we questioned how transferable this schema, which is specific to African-American women with distinct historical socio-cultural and political experiences, is to women and girls across diverse cultures. In addition, we do not assume that all women and girls conform to dominant/universal gender-roles. However, the above

dominant universal gender-roles provide a starting point to gain insight into how gender has a potential impact on women's and girls' resilience processes.

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