



Education services and resilience processes: Resilient Black South African students' experiences



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ABSTRACT

The resilience literature is increasingly drawing attention to formal service provision as a means for social ecologies to support children's and youths' positive adjustment to challenging life circumstances. This article interrogates the universality and simplicity of this argument. Using a secondary data analysis of the life stories of 16 resilient, Black South African students from impoverished families, we show that education services predominated students' childhood and youth experience of formal support and that there was scant experience of other formal services. We theorise that contextual and cultural specifics informed the dominance of education services. However, this service did not consistently facilitate resilience processes. When it did, education services were characterised by active teacher–community connectedness and student responsiveness. Moreover, education service providers (i.e., teachers and principals) engaged in supportive actions that went beyond the scope of typical teacher tasks. Thus, we suggest that formal service facilitation of resilience processes is complex. It requires collaborative activity that might well demand atypical service acts.

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1. Introduction

Globally, many children 'face adversity and the number of adversities they face appears to be increasing' (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013, p. 3). The nature and extent of these adversities are reported in annually updated reports (see, for example, UNICEF's State of the World's Children reports, <http://www.unicef.org/publications/index.html>). Among others, poverty, chronic parental discord, violence, experiences of trauma, disability, and ill health place children at risk of negative developmental outcomes. In 2010, for example, 60% of all South African children lived below the poverty line (i.e., on less than \$50/month), 3.8 million children were orphaned (80% of which were of school-going age), and 0.5% (around 90 000 children) were living in child-headed households (Hall, Woolard, Lake, & Smith, 2012). Growing up with such challenges threatens children's positive development.

However, not all children are equally negatively affected by adversity. In many instances, children adjust well to conditions of hardship (Masten, 2001). From the perspective of the Social Ecology of Resilience Theory (SERT), which forms the theoretical framework of this article, children adjust well to challenging life-circumstances with the support of their social ecologies (Ungar, 2011a).

The cardinal role of supportive social ecologies to youths' positive adjustment was originally introduced by seminal studies of resilience (e.g., Hetherington, 1989; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1982). For instance, following an investigation, over time, into why some Hawaiian children adjusted well to psychosocial risk and challenging life events, Werner and Smith (1982, 2001) noted the salient contributions of supportive extended family, positive schooling experiences, community-based mentors, and pro-social organisations. Likewise, Hetherington (1989) acknowledged families' and communities' contributions to American children's positive outcomes following parental divorce. Subsequently, Ungar (2011b, 2013) has argued that social ecological factors (e.g., supportive families, supportive communities) are more crucial to children's positive outcomes in the face of risk, than are individual-level factors (e.g., a sense of humour, problem-solving acumen, or self-efficacy).

One way in which communities facilitate positive outcomes for children is via formal service provision (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012), provided such services offer quality assistance that is (a) consistently relevant to youths' needs; (b) respectful of youths' agency, cultural identities, and history; and (c) timely (Boyden, 2013; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2014; Sanders, Munford, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2014; Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van de Vijver, 2013). For example, a study of resilience among Inuit youth in remote Labrador, Canada, revealed that culturally-congruent, respectful service provision supported Aboriginal youths' resilience processes in contexts where youth suicide and substance abuse rates were significantly high

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(Liebenberg, Ikeda, Wood, *in press*). Likewise, a study of resilience among Black South African youth from disadvantaged contexts provided evidence that mandatory services (e.g., education, or foster home placements) only supported youths' constructive adjustment to risk when youths experienced these services as meaningful and respectful (Van Rensburg, Theron, Rothmann, & Kitching, 2013).

Despite the apparent value of quality services for resilience processes, service access and service use can be complicated by inequity (De Girolamo, Dagani, Purcell, Cocchi, & McGorry, 2012). In South Africa, as in most of Africa, structural and social inequality typically translates into Black people (particularly children, youths, and women) not having equal access to formal services, or not benefitting optimally from services (Møller, 2013; Patel, 2012). A case in point is the sub-Saharan children who grow up HIV + or HIV-affected and who struggle to access available services because of poverty which translates, for example, into their not being able to afford transport to service points (Mpfu, Ruhode, Mhaka-Mutepfa, January, & Mapfumo, *in press*; Skovdal & Belton, 2014). Likewise, Schenk, Kiragu, Murugi, and Sarna (2014, p.25) reported that Kenyan children's access to care was obstructed by 'the logistical hurdles of cost, distance and time'. Nevertheless, Ager (2013) concluded that recognition of the salience of social ecological supports to resilience processes has sparked a global trend toward policy recommendations aimed at initiating, sustaining, and/or improving formal service provision (e.g., encouraging supportive school environments; increasing the capacity of counselling and mental health services) and informal supports (e.g., strengthening families).

Researcher and policy maker attention to formal service provision as a potential mechanism of resilience has prompted a number of questions, however. For example, Driskell, Bannerjee, and Chawla (2001) questioned the value of services, interventions and preventions that were inattentive to youth experiences of resources (including formal service provision). Skovdal and Belton (2014) questioned how social conditions shape the use and usefulness of service provision when children are HIV-affected, and subsequently edited a special journal issue devoted to answering this question. Likewise, the authors of this article began to wonder whether formal services would even emerge as a pathway of positive adjustment should there be no specific enquiry into how services impact resilience, as in the studies by Liebenberg et al. (*in press*), Liebenberg and Ungar (2014), Sanders, Munford, Liebenberg, and Ungar (2014), Ungar et al. (2013), and Van Rensburg et al. (2013). Thus, for the purposes of this article, the following questions were formulated: (i) Do resilient Black South African students, who are/were members of disadvantaged life-worlds, *spontaneously* include lived experiences of formal service provision in accounts of what supported their resilience processes during childhood and adolescence, and if yes, which formal services are foregrounded? (ii) How do self-reported services impact resilience processes? (iii) What are the characteristics of these services?

Answering these questions is imperative given recurrent calls in the resilience literature for researchers and policy makers to guard against universal and/or researcher-directed explanations of resilience processes that assume heterogeneity, and that neglect the lived experiences of youths/community members (Driskell et al., 2001; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Masten, 2014; Masten & Wright, 2010; Ungar, 2011a, 2013; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). Moreover, studies that specifically report how services support resilience processes in children and youths typically reflect North American (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2014; Ungar, 2011b, 2013; Ungar et al., 2013) or developed, service-rich contexts (Sanders et al., 2014). SERT (Ungar, 2011a, 2013) argues that resilience processes are shaped by cultural and contextual specifics and thus cautions against explanations of resilience processes that privilege North American studies. Exploring the childhood and youth service experiences of Black South Africans addresses this caveat.

2. Method

To answer the above questions, the authors re-examined an existing narrative data set that was generated by 16 resilient, Black South African university students. The authors' institution provided ethical clearance for this generation, and the students consented in writing, following detailed, informed consent procedures. In their previous analyses of this saturated data set, the authors did not consider whether/how formal service provision supported resilience processes, because the students' accounts flagged culturally-salient informal supports (i.e., kinship systems) and culturally-salient goals (i.e., tertiary education) as the most prominent resilience-supporting mechanisms (see Theron, 2013; Theron & Theron, 2013, 2014). For the purposes of this article, the authors conducted a secondary, inductive content analysis (Creswell, 2012) to investigate whether formal service use during childhood and adolescence contributed to resilience processes, and if yes, what characterised these services.

2.1. The data set

The data set comprised 490 pages of text. It was voluntarily generated by 16 resilient university students (9 men, 7 women, age range 19–53 years; see Table 1 for a summary of participant details). As described in previous publications (see Theron, 2013; Theron & Theron, 2013, 2014), the students were purposefully recruited, using a combination of gatekeeper-facilitated and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2009). Their purposeful recruitment hinged on evidence of (a) economic disadvantage, as demonstrated by their being awarded study funds by parties that reserved funding for South African students from deprived circumstances; and (b) resilience, as demonstrated by academic success and peer/lecturer endorsement of positive social and emotional functioning (as used in prior resilience studies by Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). Once nominated for inclusion, all students were asked to consider whether they thought of themselves as resilient. All nominated students did. All 16 reported backgrounds of chronic, crippling poverty (including often going to bed hungry and being without protective clothing or shoes) and continued financial need (e.g., not being able to afford required textbooks or transport to/from university). All participants had endured additional risks (such as violent neighbourhoods and social marginalisation) which predicted maladjustment.

The data set was generated by students' response to the following broad prompt: "Please share the story of your life with me. I am particularly interested in the adversities that challenged you and how you adjusted well in the face of these." Although the first author encouraged students' retelling of their stories with questions such as 'Why do you think that happened?' or 'What did you think about [that]?' her role was that of an active listener, rather than a traditional interviewer, as is true of narrative approaches to data generation (Chase, 2011). At no stage did the first author use questions to elicit information about students' experiences/use of and/or access to formal service provision. With their written permission, the students' stories were audio-recorded and transcribed.

2.2. Data analyses

For the purpose of this article, data analysis occurred in three phases. First, we (i.e., the authors) reread the data set to locate data segments (if any) that included accounts of formal services (e.g., education services, mental health services, social welfare, or correctional services) that impacted resilience processes. We discarded any segments that did not relate to formal service use during childhood (i.e., 0–18 years, as defined by the United Nations General Assembly, 1989) or youth (i.e., 15–24 years, as defined by UNESCO, *no date*), as we were interested in the resilience processes of children and young people.

Second, we independently analysed the remaining segments to understand how identified formal resources impacted resilience

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