



A critical review of South African child and youth resilience studies, 2009–2017

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ABSTRACT

In contexts of high levels of structural disadvantage, such as South Africa, resilience among children and youth becomes increasingly important to buffer children and youth from the negative effects of adversity. This article reports on a systematic review of research conducted in South Africa over the period 2009 to 2017 on the resilience of children and youth (ages 0 to 24) from the perspectives of young people themselves. It serves as a follow-up and refinement of an earlier publication in 2010. A total of 61 journal articles are reviewed. Four categories of social-ecological resilience-enablers emerge from these studies, viz. personal, relational, structural and spiritual/cultural. Most of the resilience-enablers identified in these studies are in the personal and relational domains. Various reasons for this finding are discussed, and emerging recommendations for service professionals (particularly social workers and educational psychologists) and youth resilience researchers are advanced.

1. Introduction

Research internationally highlights the vulnerability of youth (France, 2016), with high rates of unemployment following the global economic crisis of 2007. Children, similarly, face high levels of adversity, particularly in war-torn regions of the world (Cummings, Merrilees, Taylor, & Mondri, 2016) and through child trafficking (West, 2016). Children and youth in South Africa, also, are highly vulnerable. In 2017, South African youth (aged 15–24) had the highest rate of youth unemployment globally – 57.4% (World Data Bank, 2018b). Child poverty in South Africa, while halved over the period 2003 to 2014, remains at 30% – almost a third of children are unable to afford a minimum balanced diet (Hall & Budlender, 2016). Large numbers of South African children are orphans – in 2014, 13% of children were single orphans and a further 3% were double orphans (Hall & Sambu, 2016).

The capacity of South Africa to deal effectively with these challenges is hampered by the country's socioeconomic profile. In 2017, children (ages 0–14) made up about a third of the South African population and youth (ages 15–34) an additional third (StatsSA, 2017a). With the high youth unemployment rate, this means that a large proportion of the population is unable to contribute financially to their households. These young people require financial support from adults and, in many cases, the state. Furthermore, South Africa has

exceptionally high levels of income inequality, evidenced by the 2014 Gini coefficient of 63.0% – the highest inequality globally from 2011 to 2017 (World Data Bank, 2018a). Together, these data suggest an imbalance between need and supply: there is a great need for support among a majority of the population, but inadequate resources available to meet this need. Consequently, there is great concern about the well-being and development of South African children and youth.

In such conditions, an interest emerges in how some children and youth manage to develop normatively or demonstrate better-than-expected competence – in short, to do well. Researchers are curious to understand how some young people navigate through these adversities and establish themselves as young adults, in education, employment and family life. This capacity to do well, despite adverse conditions, is referred to as 'resilience' (Theron & Theron, 2010), and the processes and/or resources that enable resilient outcomes are termed 'resilience-enablers'. Van Breda (2018a: 4) thus defines resilience as: "The multi-level processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity". This definition supports our adoption of a social ecological approach to resilience. This approach, which views resilience of individuals as emanating from a range of systems in the individual's social environment, is favoured by authoritative resilience scholars (Cicchetti, 2013; Masten, 2018; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Ungar, 2012).

Increasingly, researchers are interested not only in understanding

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the resilience processes that facilitate better life outcomes, but also in translating this understanding into practice to improve people's lives (Masten, 2017). There is thus a growing concern among resilience researchers to generate insights that are relevant to service professionals, such as social workers and educational psychologists, equipping them with knowledge that can be used to mobilise children and youth's resilience processes in adverse contexts.

In 2010, Theron and Theron systematically reviewed South African research on youth resilience over the period 1990 to 2008. Their review of 23 peer-reviewed journal articles identified resilience processes, relevant to South African young people, located in the self, family, community and culture. They also found that few studies located resilience at the intersection between youth and their social environments and that studies paid little attention to the cultural expressions of resilience.

The aim of this paper is to update Theron and Theron's (2010) review, by analysing South African research published in the nine years from 2009 to 2017. Our focus is on the views of vulnerable children and youth (aged 0 to 24 years) regarding what enables them to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity. In addition, and in response to the transformational agenda of resilience work (Masten, 2017), we aim to extend the focus of the original review by distilling implications for service professionals, particularly our own practice professions of social work and educational psychology.

2. Resilience theory and practice

Resilience theory emerges as a response to the observation that, despite adverse conditions, where many people experience a deterioration in psychosocial functioning, some individuals manage to recover or maintain a 'good' level of functioning. It asks what it is about those individuals (or indeed any other system) that enables them to recover, when others do not. Thus Masten (2014b: 10) defines resilience as "The capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development". Here the three elements of resilience theory are seen: adverse conditions, successful adaptation and capacity or processes (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

Along with the growing interest in resilience processes, there is an emerging critique of resilience. Authors like Garrett (2016), Harrison (2013) and Joseph (2013) are concerned about the highly individualising approach of much resilience research, which internalises resilience processes. They express concern that this makes individuals responsible for their well-being, thus potentially blaming those who do not cope and exonerating the macro system of society from its responsibility to deal with adverse social conditions. For example, it can be argued that studying the resilience of a child growing up in poverty implies that the child is responsible for dealing with the effects of the macro structural forces that impinge on her or his life, and diverts attention away from these forces, instead of critiquing and dealing with them. This masking of structural social dynamics at the expense of the individual has led some authors to argue that resilience theory has been co-opted by neo-liberalism (Garrett, 2016; Joseph, 2013), thereby absolving the state and society of its responsibility.

There has in recent years, however, been a shift in thinking among many resilience researchers in light of such critiques (Van Breda, 2018a). Ungar (2012), for example, has shown that the social ecology explains more about individuals' resilient outcomes than internal factors. He also notes that many of the resilience processes previously constructed as individual are, in fact, relational or social. Some authors (Van Breda & Dickens, 2017) have drawn on the person-in-environment framework to argue that resilience processes lie primarily in the interactions between people and their social environments, and others have emphasised resilience as a complex interplay between genetic, psychological, relational and environmental factors (Liu, Reed, & Girard, 2017; Masten, 2007; Rutter, 2007). In addition, some authors

(Hart et al., 2016) have given considerable attention to resilience as a social justice issue, so as not just to 'overcome the odds' but also to 'change the odds'. There is, in short, a growing movement in resilience research away from individualising resilience to recognising the highly interactional nature of resilience within the social environment.

This concern for the interactional and environment factors that enable resilience has, in addition, led to growing interest in the application of resilience processes by service professionals. To date, resilience work has followed a transformational agenda which has included translating empirical evidence into practitioner guidelines and/or intervention programmes (Masten, 2014b). For example, South African researchers drew on local understandings of youth resilience to develop the Khazimula intervention (Theron, 2018). This intervention was taken up by service providers, teachers, and youth leaders across South Africa and used to champion the resilience of young people challenged by structural disadvantage (Theron, 2017b).

Whilst the transformational agenda is important, the usefulness of transforming evidence into resilience-focused interventions can be hampered when the demand for interventions exceeds the supply. For example, in South Africa (as in other economically-developing contexts) there are too few service professionals to adequately serve the large numbers of children and youth who are vulnerable. This curtails the capacity and opportunity to implement evidence-informed interventions (Theron & Theron, 2014). Moreover, resilience-enabling interventions developed in the Global North do not necessarily translate well into the African context due to culture differences. Similarly, given the dynamism of the resilience process, interventions developed in a rural Global South context will not necessarily be equally effective in urban Global South contexts. One mitigating response to the aforementioned is to acquaint service professionals with broad evidence-informed pathways of child and youth resilience. These professionals can be encouraged to use this knowledge, in collaboration with the communities they serve, to effect everyday changes (such as encouragement of warm caregiving) that are likely to bolster child and youth resilience (Theron, 2016a).

3. Methodology

The research question informing our systematic literature review was: *From 2009–2017, what do South African children and youth (aged 0–24) say enables them to achieve better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity?*

We conducted a systematic literature search of South African resilience research over the period 2009 to 2017 (see Fig. 1). We considered only academic journal articles, because we knew there was a large body of such literature and wanted to draw only on peer-reviewed work.

Two sources of literature were searched: (1) several electronic databases, viz. EBSCOHost's Academic Search Complete, Africa-Wide Information, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, Humanities Source and PsycARTICLES; Gale's Academic Onefile and Psychological Collection; Oxford Journals Online; Project Muse; SAePublications (a collection of South African peer-reviewed journals); Sage Journals Online; and ScienceDirect; and (2) a list of 274 South African journals accredited by the national Department of Higher Education and Training.

The first source was searched for 'resilien*' and 'South Africa' in the title, keywords and abstract (though some databases also included full text), and a publication date specifier (2009–2017). The second source was searched through a manual inspection of tables of contents. Articles were included if they contained the word 'resilien*' (i.e. resilient, resilience, resiliency) anywhere in the title, keywords or abstract and concerned humans (rather than machines, buildings, animals, climate, etc.). This search yielded 4,857 articles: 4,363 from the first source and 494 from the second.

The abstracts of these articles were screened to remove duplicates

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