Resilience over time: Learning from school-attending adolescents living in conditions of structural inequality

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Cross-sectional studies offer inadequate understandings of adolescent resilience. Nevertheless, few longitudinal studies account for the resilience of school-attending adolescents challenged by the structural disadvantages associated with South African township residence. This prompts two questions: (i) Do the same (or different) resilience-enabling resources inform township-dwelling, school-attending adolescents' resilience accounts when they self-explain their resilience at two distinct points in time? (ii) Which resilience-enabling resources, if any, become significantly more (or less) salient over time and how do township-dwelling, school-attending adolescents explain the resilience-enabling value of these resources?
Methods: To answer the aforementioned, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative study with 140, township-dwelling, school-attending, South African adolescents (62.1% girls; mean age: 13.8 years [Time 1]; 15.8 years [Time 2]). They completed a draw-and-write activity. This generated visual and narrative data that we analysed using multiple methods (content analyses, chi square tests of frequency counts, and thematic analysis).
Results: A comparison of school-attending adolescents' accounts of their resilience at two points in time revealed the longevity of nine, generic resilience-enabling resources. A comparison of how frequently adolescents reported these resources at Time 1 and 2 showed significant increases for education, faith-based supports, and peer support. A comparison of adolescents' reasons for identifying these three resources showed that education promises an improved future, while all three facilitate respite from hardship and/or mastery over current challenges.
Conclusion: The salience of education, faith-based supports, and peer support can be explained using developmental, contextual and cultural perspectives. This explanation prompts pragmatic and cautionary lessons for resilience advocates.

Because adolescent resilience is understood to be a dynamic process that varies over time, cross-sectional (i.e., once-off) studies that account for how adversity-exposed adolescents develop well offer sub-optimal explanations of processes of positive adjustment (Masten, 2014). Cognisant of this caveat, a substantial number of resilience studies have followed cohorts of children in order to better understand what enables and constrains human resilience. Across these studies, positive outcomes in the face or aftermath of adversity (i.e., resilience) are associated with personal strengths (such as impulse control, self-esteem, or being motivated to achieve) and systemic enablers (such as supportive family, constructive peer relationships, or quality schooling) (see Werner, 2013). However, among the published studies that have focused explicitly on explaining adolescent resilience over time, only two have been conducted with a South African adolescent cohort (i.e., Bachman DeSilva et al., 2012; Collishaw, Gardner, Lawrence Aber, & Cluver, 2016). In

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both instances the researchers were specifically interested in explaining the resilience of orphans and used quantitative methodologies to do so.

Given the growing recognition that resilience processes are sensitive to temporal, contextual, and cultural influences (Masten, 2014, 2018; Ungar, 2011, 2018), and that qualitative work offers unique insights into these influences (Li, Bottrell, & Armstrong, 2017; Liebenberg & Theron, 2015), there is a need for qualitative insights into what enables the resilience of African adolescents over time. Thus, the purpose of this article is to document the findings that resulted from a longitudinal qualitative study with 140 structurally disadvantaged, school-attending, Black adolescents living in South African townships. In particular, this article is concerned with the similarities and differences in how these school-attending, Black adolescents accounted for their resilience at two distinct points in time (24 months apart) and the implications for those who seek to champion adolescent resilience.

We were specifically interested in the resilience of adolescents challenged by structural disadvantage given that such inequity, which is often beyond the control of vulnerable adolescents and their families, pervades South and sub-Saharan Africa (Mutasa & Paterson, 2015). Structural disadvantage is associated with resource constraints (including inadequate healthcare, housing, and education facilities), elevated levels of violence, limited opportunities for upward mobility, and diminished sociocultural capital (Johnson & Kane, 2018; Kane, 2011). South African townships are infamously associated with structural disadvantage.

As explained by Swartz (2010), South African townships are inferior settlements (similar to favelas) that were orchestrated by Apartheid politicians as part of the systematic structural violation of Black South Africans. Even though South Africa became a democracy in 1994, township residence has continued to be racialized (i.e., mostly, townships are home to Black people) (Swartz, Harding, & De Lannoy, 2012). Because townships are typically located on the peripheries of cities or towns, township residents are spatially isolated (Hall & Posel, 2012). In addition to spatial barriers, being a township resident is generally synonymous with high exposure to multiple risks (including violent crime, material insufficiency, overcrowding, communicable disease, inferior services, and inferior infrastructure) and concomitant instability, reduced quality of life, and limited upward mobility (Mathews & Benvenuti, 2014). In turn, these risks are associated with family fragmentation and/or variable living arrangements and survival-oriented, within-country migrancy (Hall & Posel, 2018). Even though these risks predict negative developmental outcomes, many township-dwelling adolescents develop normatively and are described as resilient (Mampane, 2014).

1. Adolescent resilience over time

From a social ecological perspective (Ungar, 2011), adolescents are capable of coping well with adversity (such as structural disadvantage) when two conditions are met. First, their social ecologies provide resilience-enabling supports (e.g., opportunities to form meaningful connections with others, quality education and other services, or sociocultural capital) and second, adolescents appropriate these supports. In other words, resilience draws on individual resources (such as the capacity to be responsive to support) and supportive systemic initiatives. Individual resources and systemic supports are likely to inform processes (such as attachment, meaning-making, self-regulation, problem-solving, or agency and mastery) that facilitate good outcomes in the face or aftermath of adversity (Masten, 2014). Although processes that facilitate good outcomes have a protective (i.e., salutary) effect in the face or aftermath of risk, they would typically also have a constructive effect in the absence of risk (e.g., achieving mastery has benefits for adolescents who are disadvantaged by violence or poverty, as well as for adolescents who enjoy household/community privilege) (Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2012).

Seminal studies of resilience across the lifespan, such as the Kauai Longitudinal Study (Werner & Smith, 2001) or Project Competence Longitudinal Study (Garmezy & Devine, 1984), report resilience supports that fit with social ecological approaches to resilience (i.e., these studies report interactive individual and systemic enablers of resilience). The adolescence-specific results of these studies included constructive adolescent-adult relationships and adolescent cognitive and socio-emotional competence, along with all the resources and mechanisms (e.g., high self-esteem, intelligence, and enabling social skills) that are implicit in such competence (Masten & Tellegen, 2012; Werner & Smith, 2001). Subsequent studies, such as the Christchurch Health and Development Study that followed a cohort of 1265 New Zealand children from birth to their 21st year, reported similar individual and systemic supports (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003). Results that were specific to how adolescents avoided externalising responses to childhood and family adversity showed low adolescent inclination to seek novelty, high self-esteem, and affiliations to positive peers. Adolescents who avoided internalising responses to childhood and family risks showed low inclination to seek novelty, low neuroticism, and positive attachments to at least one parent.

Recent longitudinal studies echo these formative results. They continue to report both individual and systemic supports. For example, in the UK, Collishaw, Hammerton, et al. (2016) assessed adolescent resilience in the face of chronic and severe parental depression three times over a four-year period. Over time, adolescent resilience was significantly associated with the depressed parent's capacity for emotional expressiveness, support from the parent who was not clinically depressed, social support (e.g., from peers and friends), regular exercise, and self-efficacy. In contrast, Eisman, Stoddard, Heinze, Caldwell, and Zimmerman (2015) reported that parental support (more specifically maternal support) consistently enabled the mental health resilience of urban American adolescents who had been exposed to violence. However, over time, peer support and sociodemographic influences were not significantly related to mental health resilience. As forewarned by others (e.g., Masten, 2014, 2018; Rutter, 2013), the disparate conclusions reported by Eisman et al. (2015) and Collishaw, Hammerton et al. (2016) caution against the assumption that the supports that are generically associated with resilience will have enduring protective value over time and across contexts.