

Exploring resiliency: Academic achievement among disadvantaged black youth in South Africa.



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This study attempted to understand how a group of black youth in South Africa who experienced poverty achieved academic success and demonstrated a resilient trajectory. Through a qualitative research design that included ethnographic interviewing, case studies and observation, an insider's perspective was gained. This method was chosen for its ability to generate rich descriptive accounts and use multiple data sources. The results of this study indicated that this group of black students who achieved academic success in South Africa was high achieving, had strong initiative and motivation, was goal orientated and experienced the self as having agency. The atmosphere in the family, usually characterised by strong support also influenced a resilient response. Relationships with teachers, role models and supportive community members were viewed as protective factors. The findings of this research are helpful for educators; in the formulation of child and family policy, and for future comparative studies.

Keywords: academic achievement; adolescence; black youth, resilience; social support, stressors

Resilience, the ability to maintain competence despite stressful and difficult life circumstances, has become an important concept in the field of psychology in recent years (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Walsh, 2003) and is derived primarily from humanistic psychology theory. Abraham Maslow, leading the humanistic tradition and looking at the healthy side of human existence, upbraided psychology for focusing more on human frailties than on human strengths. The risk studies of the 1970s belong to that genre of research that made deductions about normal human functioning by studying abnormal populations. Resiliency research is attentive to the concerns that Maslow raised, is a more positive development in psychology, and focuses on

mastery, competence, coping, pro-social behaviours, strengths and resources (Baruth & Carroll, 2002; Maluccio, 2002).

Resiliency is a subjective concept that is not simple to define. What may be considered resilient in one context may not be so in another. In this study, resiliency was viewed as the ability to embrace the challenges of life and to retain openness to the world in the face of adversity.

Socio-economic stress carries the potential of jeopardising children's growth and development, and damaging their sense of trust, safety and security. Among the most at-risk children in society are those born under conditions of entrenched socio-economic disadvantage, the effects of which can be far-reaching. Poverty strikes children at their very core by limiting their access to the basic needs of food, shelter and housing, and is strongly correlated with poorer academic performance. As a risk factor, it has a cumulative rather than unitary effect (Carter & Murdock, 2001).

Even though apartheid in South Africa ended in 1994, the country's wealth distribution remains hugely skewed so that 10% of the population, mostly whites, controls 80% of the economy (Murray, 2002). As a result, the majority of blacks continues to experience poverty, homelessness and unemployment. Children growing up in South Africa are exposed to many social risks that can be considered to be apartheid's enduring legacy of social inequality and deprivation with one out of every eight children dying before the age of 5 years (Barbarin, 2003).

Further, a climate of strained resources contributes to an increase in racial tension between whites who may resent affirmative action and school desegregation and blacks who may resent those whites who continue to retain the wealth in the country (Murray, 2002). Thus, one finds race and socio-economic status integrally linked in South Africa, as is the case in many other nations. Alcock (1999) wisely cautions, 'because race is such an important feature of the structure of poverty and inequality . . . its impact must be included in understanding, and tackled by, policy development' (p.185).

Despite an evolving understanding of resiliency among children and adolescents, there is a dearth of research that provides insight into how some children are able to overcome the deleterious effects of poverty. The purpose of this study was to explore how a particular group of black youth was able to overcome the adversity of their socio-economic status and indicate a resilient trajectory. The research was based on the premises (a) that human behaviour is complex and attempts to simplify it are erroneous and (b) that the psychological challenges facing socio-economically disadvantaged groups in South Africa are integrally linked to a variety of political and historical factors.

Academic achievement was chosen as an indicator of resiliency because it is the accomplishment of an important developmental task. Several authors have stated that cognitive competence and competence in school and other social settings are markers of, and a prerequisite for, resiliency (Bernard, 2004; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001; Jew, Green & Kroger, 1999; Masten et al., 1999).

Table 1. Results of 1994 matriculation examinations in the KwaZulu-Natal Province

Candidates	Total Passes	%	Matriculation	Exemption	%
African	53797	30711	57	8976	17
Coloured	1309	1196	91	346	26
Indian	12571	11548	92	6283	50
White	7732	7554	98	3845	50

Source: South African Department of Education (1997)

Although academic achievement is not the only expression of resiliency, nor an indicator of greater resiliency, it was chosen for this study because it is easily measurable and increasingly sought by poor families in South Africa.

Resiliency is a process that occurs within a cultural context. What may be seen as an ordinary developmental task in one society may not be so in another (Werner, 2001). In the South Africa context, academic success, to a large extent, can be seen as a measure of resiliency, even though in other societies it might be considered an ordinary developmental task. Understanding the process and the cultural context within which it occurs can be informative for families striving to break the cycle of poverty.

The general aim of this study was to identify the categories of coping and support that socio-economically disadvantaged black youth in a particular township in South Africa described as having helped them achieve academic success. The more specific aims of this study were to

- (a) gain an understanding of the stressors that participants face
- (b) explore how participants were able to achieve academic success
- (c) gain an understanding of how participants viewed schooling
- (d) gain an understanding of how participants viewed the level of support provided by their families and communities.

METHOD

A qualitative research design with anthropological methods of data collection that included ethnographic interviewing, case studies and observation was used to explore the major aim of this research: the factors that contribute to resilience among a group of socio-economically disadvantaged black youth in South Africa. This approach was chosen because the study was exploratory and focused on discovering answers to important questions, processes and relationships, not to test them (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As Auerbach (2003) indicates, anthropological methods of data gathering are valuable in exploratory studies that depend on participants' perspectives.

Using a diversity of data gathering methods also allows the researcher to cross check information gathered by means of one method against information gathered by means of another. For example, it is possible to compare information gained from

an interview with an individual participant against material gained from an interview with the same participant's family members. This cross-checking of a participant's data circumvents a potential threat to the validity of research, namely, self-report (participant) bias.

A township on the outskirts of Durban, a large city on the east coast of South Africa and in the province of KwaZulu-Natal was selected as the setting for the research. This particular site was chosen as a location for this study because of its accessibility and familiarity to the researcher. Since this township was originally designed by the previous apartheid government of South Africa as a racially segregated residential area, at the time this study was conducted, all the residents were black. It was also an area where most residents were, and continue to be, economically disadvantaged (Desai, 2002; 2003).

The research was primarily conducted by the author, herself a South African, who has worked as a psychotherapist and has experience in clinical interviewing. Since interviews and verbal communication were important aspects of the research process, the researcher's skill in establishing rapport, building trust and, encouraging verbal responsiveness was an asset to the research process. The researcher's working knowledge of isiZulu, the first language of participants, helped her make positive connections with family members of participants, especially the elderly.

Participants

Sixteen participants, in their first year at university, participated in the study. Purposeful random sampling was used in selecting participants who demonstrated academic excellence. Participants had completed their mid-year examinations and by using university records, the researcher was able to identify those students who were at the top of their class and lived in the township designated as the research site. Fifty African students who indicated that isiZulu was their home language were identified. Using random selection, twenty students were sent letters inviting them to participate in the study.

The first sixteen students that responded to the letters became the participants of this study. There were eight males and eight females altogether and the mean age of the participants was 21 years; the oldest participant was 30 years old and the youngest 18 years of age. Their career plans varied from social work and teaching to engineering and computer programming.

Table 2 illustrates the demographic data that participants provided to the researcher. The generalisability of this study is limited by its small sample size, but it offers some insight into how a particular group of individuals was able to survive adverse environments. Since this study depended largely on participants' recall, the data generated were subjective.

Table 2. Participant demographic data

Males (n)		8
Females (n)		8
Mean age		21.8 years
Age of oldest participant		30 years
Age of youngest participant		18 years
Average annual household income		R12 323 ±US\$ 1 850
Career plans of participants	Social worker	4
	Teacher	6
	Lawyer	2
	Engineer	2
	Administrator	1
	Computer programmer	1

Data collection

Participants were first asked to complete a questionnaire that gave the researcher general information about their family history, income, home life and significant life events. The researcher assured the participants that all information provided would be confidential and reported in an anonymous manner. In the next step of this research, each participant was asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The interview was tape-recorded and the researcher asked participants several open-ended questions aimed at gaining information on they had achieved academic success.

In the third step, the researcher conducted an interview with each participant to assess self-understanding. In this interview, the researcher followed a structured protocol developed by Damon and Hart (1988). The protocol outlines a series of questions aimed at eliciting information on an individual's understanding of the self.

As a fourth step, participants introduced the researcher to their immediate family (parents and siblings) and other extended family and friends (e.g., grandparents, uncles, aunts and neighbours). The researcher had informal conversations about participants with these family members and friends.

Finally, each participant was asked to write a narrative account of his or her life, describing the hardships they faced and the factors that helped him or her attain academic achievement. There was no page limit and participants had two weeks to complete the task.

Once the researcher had gathered all the information, it was constructed into case studies that attempted to capture the uniqueness of each participant.

Data analysis

Data analysis began in the field, so that the researcher could get feedback from participants on whether they agreed with the initial findings, interpretations and conclusions that she had made. This was done to prevent researcher bias, which often threatens the validity of ethnographic research. Discussing interpretations with participants was one way of ensuring interpretive validity, an important type of validity to be concerned about in a study in which eliciting insiders' perspectives are the primary purpose (Auerbach, 2003; Maxwell, 1996).

By using a qualitative computer programme called *HyperResearch* (Researchware, 2003) the case studies were inductively and deductively coded so that recurring themes and patterns were identified. The programme also permitted the case studies to be coded and analysed across the categories of coping and support.

FINDINGS

The initial findings revealed two broad thematic frameworks: (a) factors that were experienced as stressors among participants and (b) factors that were experienced as supportive of their resilient trajectory. It was possible to break down the supportive factors even further into three conceptual themes: first, the individual characteristics of participants; second, the support of families and role models; and third, the support present within schools and communities. These findings are discussed below.

Factors identified as stressors

Poverty was reported by all participants as a major stressor that affected all aspects of their lives. It was also evident in the observations made by the researcher: barefoot children playing in the dust, the stench of overflowing sewage, the scrawny dogs that scratched around a rubbish heap, the rusted cars piled in front yards, the dirty laundry that lay around, and the stark lack of economic and recreational facilities. Food, a basic necessity, did not always seem readily available – an observation that was confirmed by the participants themselves:

I walked uphill to school for ten kilometres everyday on an empty stomach . . . we had very little food at home, only enough for one meal in the evening . . . my father worked in an abattoir in the city and only came home on weekends, usually without a cent in his pocket because he had spent it all on *ijuba* [beer] . . . my grandmother's small pension is all we had for money (Zani).

There was a noticeable lack of library, transportation, shopping and recreational facilities in the township. In fact, except for a truck, parked on a street corner, which sold bare necessities, such as milk and bread, the township did not have a convenience store. Not a single library facility was visible. This was confirmed by participants who reported having major language, transportation, library and financial difficulties. Since the township did not have library facilities, participants found themselves

commuting to the university 'just to use the library'. This was also experienced as burdensome to their families:

My grandmother was nervous when I stayed late at school to work in the library . . . she was afraid that I would be assaulted by the *tsotsis* [gangsters] on my way home (Tembi).

Since isiZulu was the primary language of the residents in this particular township, all classes at school were taught in isiZulu. However, at university, English was the primary language used and participants found they were 'slowed down with translating'.

All participants experienced financial stress as a tremendous hardship. They were constantly concerned about whether they would be able to afford university tuition and other expenses:

I don't have a financial backbone . . . I feel embarrassed to always ask my mother, the sole breadwinner, for money (Toko).

Violence, an unfortunate facet of South African life, is most strongly felt in the black townships that also lack adequate community policing (Dinan, McCall & Gibson, 2004; Reckson & Becker, 2005). Participants described being weighed down and exhausted by the sense of lawlessness and general apathy in their communities. The chronic violence forces a constant hyper-vigilance, which

drains us . . . we cannot relax . . . my grandmother is very protective, she listens to the news all the time and if there is any township violence we stay at home and don't go to school (Tembi).

The prevailing physical living conditions were also described as a source of stress. Most participants resided in basic four-room houses that were built by the previous government. None of the participants had his or her own bedroom or a separate study. Sometimes, as many as 13 people shared a two-bedroom house and had to make do with communal bathrooms:

Our family uses a communal bathroom about 100 yards away from our home . . . we take daily baths out of large dishes [basins] of water in our yard . . . we do not have running water (Nana).

Factors associated with support

Three conceptual themes relating to support for participants' academic achievement emerged. First were the individual characteristics of being goal-orientated, having initiative and motivation, and experiencing the self as possessing a measure of agency. Second was the support that came from families and was evidenced in the family atmosphere, family characteristics (siblings and spirituality) and role models.

Finally, participants were supported by their schools and communities. While these supportive factors are discussed separately here, it should be borne in mind that they are not discrete concepts but represent person-environment interactions.

The data from this research also highlight the importance of being attentive to the context in which resiliency occurs. Using a contextual lens, we can view resiliency that occurs under chronically stressful conditions as emergent resiliency while resiliency that occurs in the face of sudden stressful events can be viewed as reactive resiliency (Dass, 1997). Since the participants in this study inhabited a chronically stressful environment in which their coping skills were constantly tested, emergent resiliency appeared to be predominant.

Individual resiliency factors

An analysis of the case studies revealed that participants in this study were high achieving and goal-orientated, exhibited initiative, were motivated, and experienced the self as possessing a measure of agency. In their narrative writing, the initiative and motivation that participants described themselves as possessing could be translated into: 'I'll show you . . . I can do just about anything if I put my mind to it.' Like most resilient children, the participants did not give up easily, and were flexible in developing a range of strategies, skills and ideas to pursue their educational goals. Significant people in the participants' lives confirmed these findings:

She is always going to school and works very hard, she goes to church on Sunday and comes home to do her chores . . . she always knows how to make a plan and is responsible and dedicated . . . and does not forget anything she has been told to do. I walk tall when I see her, we give her whatever help we can but it mostly comes from her. She is my hope in life (Zani's father).

From an examination of participants' responses on the self-understanding interview (Damon & Hart, 1988), it was clear that all participants viewed themselves as having a sense of agency and the freedom to select a different path or direction at any time, even if this path represented a radical departure from their physical, social and psychological selves. Participants indicated that they were not only individuals who had autonomy but they also held the conviction that they could actively structure their lives and direct their future with self-confidence and self-determination.

In their written narratives, participants described themselves as being able to reflect on their circumstances, make an adequate cognitive appraisal of these circumstances, assess their personal capacity for action and predict its effects. They took responsibility for the direction of their lives and the choices they made. Education was viewed as vital for upward mobility and a form of protection against the deleterious effects of poverty:

I want to take my family out of the boundaries of poverty . . . I don't want to bring up my own children with the poverty that I was brought up with (Nana).

A strong commitment to uplifting their socio-economic status through education was expressed by all participants.

Family support

Participants viewed the characteristics of the family (e.g., warm, nurturing and supportive) and the role of older siblings as contributing significantly to their success:

Even though my father is not living with us there is still warmth in our house because my mother gave us the love that we needed . . . she struggles to keep our family happy and together (Tembi).

In turn, parents had high expectations for their children even though they themselves had not been able to graduate from high school:

I appreciated when my mother asked other family members to be quiet when I have some studying to be done (Buhle).

I am my family's hope . . . they don't want me to stay at college but to commute everyday . . . because they love me so much . . . I often overhear them talking proudly of me as the bright one (Cedric).

The sacrifices made by their parents did not go unnoticed by the participants. Buhle began high school when there was a lot of violence at her school:

So my mother changed my school to one that was further away but needed transportation to get to . . . this was an added expense and my mother took on extra hours at work to pay for my transportation . . . what a sacrifice, so I cannot let her down (Buhle).

The extended family provided some participants with what they could not get from their own immediate families. Several participants reported receiving support in the form of financial assistance, food and clothing from extended family members. They also received indirect support in the form of positive role models and advice on how to seek funding for university studies, among other things.

The significance of role models

Role models were identified by most participants as derived from within their own families, schools and black personalities in whose footsteps they hoped to follow. Many participants named the strength and positive qualities of their parents and school teachers as worth emulating:

He [a school teacher] passed away . . . assassinated in township violence . . . I don't take his teachings for granted; he taught me how to overcome the odds of life . . . he is my role model

. . . Mandela is also my role model because he fought for liberation . . . is a visionary and I want to be that kind of person one day (Zweli).

Schools and teachers that support resiliency

All participants were educated at public schools and viewed schooling positively. They liked their teachers and saw them as role models and a source of encouragement. Since participants attended high school around the time that apartheid ended (1994), all their teachers were black:

Our principal at high school told us to work hard for our future . . . he told us we are architects of our own lives and we can choose to build our futures as a strong brick house or a [shack] (Nana).

School was also the place to meet supportive friends:

My friends at high school helped me out by pointing out when I did bad stuff (Winnie).

The role of spirituality in enhancing resiliency

Participants saw going to church and other religious practices such as traditional ancestral worship as important in shaping the people they had become. Almost every participant reported attending church, although each differed in how regularly they attending. They saw faith in a higher power as giving meaning to their lives and providing comfort in challenging times. Their sense of spiritual connection was translated into a commitment to serving their community in the future.

A core group of participants also reported adherence to traditional ancestral practices that they felt were not in conflict with their Christian faith. They believed that their ancestors (deceased relatives) watched over them and that it was possible to communicate with them and to ask for their guidance before making important decisions:

Whenever I have an important decision to make . . . I light a candle, burn some *mpepo* [dried sage] and invoke the memory of family members who have passed away . . . whenever I feel down and sad, I pray (Tembi).

The significance of community support

Participants differed in their opinions about their communities. Some experienced community support while others were disillusioned by the envy, jealousy and low expectations of others:

My community sees that I am doing the right thing . . . mothers tell me their children can look at me as a role model when I graduate (Zani).

When I graduated [from] high school everyone in my row [of shacks], were so happy . . . I was the first one to get an exemption so I could go to university (Nana).

Discussions with community members confirmed this about Nana, describing her as:

A good example for our children . . . most people don't pass high school in the first try . . . Nana graduated [from school] at 17 and went to university . . . she does not waste time (Community member).

However, there were also reports of unsupportive community members:

Many people in my community are not happy that I go to university . . . because very few people go to college . . . and people envy me because their children have dropped out of school (Siya).

Siya's sister-in-law confirmed this opinion of an unsupportive community:

They take care of their own . . . rather than being concerned about those that are less fortunate.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The risk of stressors

Although familial poverty is a high predictor of school failure in children, not all poor children fail in school (Ramey, Ramey & Lanzi, 1998). This was certainly the case for participants in this study. The combined micro-variables of family support, parental availability, a positive family atmosphere and good role models appear to have outweighed the negative effects of socio-economic status. However, this study was based on a small sample size and a wide variation in the outcomes for children of poor families is possible. Our understanding in this area is limited and it is imperative, in order to better understand the connection between poverty and resiliency, that we engage in further study of this important area of development.

Furthermore, although the factors that contributed to resiliency were discussed separately it was done with the understanding that these factors in fact always occur interactively, even though we may not be able to define the interaction clearly. For example, it is likely that a supportive family may have encouraged and cheered a participant towards academic achievement and may have made up for the participant's own lack of motivation; or that a participant's own determination and drive may have far outweighed the negating circumstance of a chaotic and dysfunctional home life, facilitating a resilient response. The data presented in the findings of this study provide a description not an interaction.

Racial separation was an entrenched political system in South Africa until 1994. Thus, participants in this study spent the most formative years of their life under

this unjust system. One can assume that they would have been exposed very early in life to discrimination based on race and that they would have been susceptible to developing a low self esteem and poor self confidence, outcomes which usually are associated with ongoing oppression (Cassidy, O'Connor, Howe & Warden, 2004). Yet, the findings of this study indicate the contrary. Participants demonstrated high levels of self-esteem and confidence. What accounts for this? Perhaps an explanation can be sought in the interaction between the unique characteristics of participants and the events of 1976, when black students actively opposed the requirement of taking Afrikaans as an additional language at school (they were already taking English and an African language). This opposition sparked an explosion of rebellion that led to students rejecting the entire apartheid education as oppressive and unjust; a protest that came to be known as the Soweto Riots. The youth in this research were politicised within this culture. It is likely that these events influenced their desire to take an active stance in their education and ensure that their life course would be different from that of their parents. Participants in this study firmly believed that they, and not a society that had already disillusioned them, would shape their life path. This corresponds with Gilgun's (1999) research, which indicated that human agency and the will to do or be something has a major, perhaps a central, role in resilience.

Since participants in this study were reflective about their life trajectories and the sense they made of their world, the impact of the negative messages they received may have become less important. They were thus able to derive meaning from the situations and demands that life presented them with; an ability that can be extremely helpful in the management of stress. These findings concur with those of Gilgun (1999) who also found that reflection and introspection were supportive of a resilient outcome.

The finding that participants showed initiative and were goal-orientated and motivated is not an unusual finding in a society where individuals have to work out their own destiny, values and lifestyles to a far greater extent than is the case in more settled societies. Resilient children possess 'mental flexibility' as an underlying feature of endurance (Quota, El-Sarraj & Punamaki, 2001).

Finally, in studies of children who experience stressful environments, the role of social crises in stimulating development and achievement has been noted (Coles, 1999). Participants in this study perceived their difficulties as opportunities to produce a life trajectory that ran counter to the expectations imposed by their racial and economic circumstances.

Indigenous family life

One important finding that emerged from this study is that the extended family unit, which for so many years has characterised indigenous family life in Africa, has been able to withstand the ravages of apartheid. However, during the apartheid years, the development of townships and the migrant labour system, usually the only option of employment for rural black men, threatened this valuable form of family life, since

repressive pass laws made it impossible for families to accompany the primary breadwinner into the urban areas where they were employed.

Nonetheless, the kinship bonds that knitted communities appeared to have survived the assault of apartheid, and families continued to live in extended family units in which parenting was shared and child rearing was seen as the responsibility of the whole group. This study showed that grandparents, siblings and an extensive network of uncles and aunts could compensate for the neglect of one or both parents (Carter & Murdock 2001; Logan 2001; McAdoo, 2002; Werner, 2001). What was discovered were family constellations 'with breadth and depth, not reflected in private, triadic relationships' (Gadsden, 1999, p. 229). It is this family life that may have contributed to the fact that regardless of their actual parental situation, all the participants in this research had the opportunity to establish a secure attachment or positive relationship with at least one stable adult caregiver (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Debold, Brown, Weseen, & Brookins, 1999).

Perhaps Walsh's (2003) concept of family resilience best describes the healthy family functioning that appeared to be prevalent among the families in this study despite the many hardships they faced. Finally, the finding of parental support is consistent with the findings of other studies of disadvantaged children where a positive correlation between parental expectations and support and the educational achievement of children was also found (Halle, Kurtz-Costes & Mahoney, 1997; Okagaki, 2001). Adults who make children feel valued and important, who communicate that 'being poor was no excuse for not achieving' (Edelman, 1993, p. 5) teach children that adversity can be overcome.

Keeping the faith

The finding that spirituality plays a key role in instilling and sustaining hope; in making meaning of a disadvantaged existence has been reported in past studies. Bagley and Carroll (1998), examining African-American families, emphasised the importance of the black church and the influence of indigenous healing in alleviating daily stress. Hill (1993) also points out that African-Americans with strong religious orientations have higher social and economic achievement than those with little religious commitment. Thus, spirituality has consistently been found to support a resilient outcome. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised in accepting findings that support faith in a higher power as a coping mechanism. Placing faith in a higher power can sometimes delay individuals in taking the initiative to change their lives (Edelman, 1993).

The advantage of having black teachers

The finding that participants viewed teachers and schooling in a positive light is plausible, given that they were all taught by black teachers, many of whom lived in the neighbourhood of the school. This finding, however, should not be viewed as supportive of racially matching teachers with students. Instead, it highlights the

important role that teachers can play in the life of students when they understand the context of students' lives and are familiar with the communities from which they come.

Teachers that trust, value, respect and identify with their students and the families and communities that surround them foster resiliency (Greene, 2002). Participants in this study reported that their teachers could identify with their plight, since they (the teachers) had a similar upbringing and were visible examples of individuals who have overcome adversity.

Establishing a personal bond in which the teacher takes on the role of mentor to the student is another key to positive student-teacher relations. Teachers can play a prominent role in the lives of children, but especially in the lives of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In such communities, as in the case of this study, teachers take on the additional roles of parent, mentor, confidant and counsellor. They instil the important qualities of self-esteem and self-confidence among students, and provide a positive school experience that can potentially temper the negative effects of a difficult home life.

Resilient children, in turn, tend to be adept at using healthy resources to their advantage and the school is the first place for them to put this ability to the test (Werner, 2001). It was not clear what came first in this study: the committed teachers who were invested in the future of their students or the motivated students who possessed such excitement about schooling that they were able to easily elicit a supportive social network.

Competition for community resources

Krovetz (1999) describes resilient communities as those that focus on the protective factors of caring, high expectations and purposeful support, qualities that were found to be lacking among some community members in this study. There are two possible explanations for this finding. The first is that schooling, as an institutional innovation, creates a highly visible arena in which the individual's performance is comparatively evaluated against that of other classmates. Selection and evaluation are primary features of schooling, and they inevitably generate competition. Participation in schooling however runs counter to the cultural meanings certain African communities attach to competition, especially in an environment of scarce and limited resources. If traditional cultural practices conceal competition and personal strivings, then Western schooling may be in opposition to cultural norms and arouse dissonance and a lack of support within a non-Western community (LeVine, 1977). For example, among the Gusi of Kenya, LeVine found that educational attainment and material advantages were disguised because the community disavowed rather than displayed competition. It is possible that community members in this study may also have held a similar cultural understanding of competition and that they may not have wanted to openly validate educational achievements because it ran counter to cultural norms.

It is likely that participants perceived this lack of validation as a lack of community caring and support.

The second explanation for the lack of community support comes from the anthropological concept of the 'image of limited good', a world view commonly held by rural or peasant communities who see desired things in life as 'existing in finite quantities and always in short supply' (Foster, 1965, p. 296). As a result, members of such communities behave in ways that suggest that resources are limited and that there may not be enough to go around. It is likely that a community member who improves economically will therefore be seen as doing so at the expense of others.

CONCLUSION

Using a qualitative research design, this study attempted to explore the factors that contributed to resilience among a group of socio-economically disadvantaged black youth in South Africa in the 1990s. Although low socio-economic status had not daunted the educational aspirations and academic performance of the participants in this study, poverty was clearly experienced as a substantial social stressor. It can be argued that since they inhabited a chronically stressful environment they showed emergent resiliency.

Three conceptual frameworks were identified as having helped participants in attaining academic achievement: First were the individual characteristics that the participants themselves possessed (goal orientation, initiative, motivation and an understanding of the self as possessing a measure of agency); second, the support of families and role models; and third, supportive schools and communities.

However, these positive findings should be tempered by the recognition that the concept of resiliency should be used with caution. It is easy to become captivated by the magical and mythical qualities of resiliency, as if the individual is capable of surmounting any obstacle that arises. Such views have the potential to lead to linear and simplistic predictions about risk and human behaviour (Greene, 2002, p. 41).

The trend towards focusing on those factors that reduce risk and increase coping, however, is a step in the right direction and reflective of a discipline that values and respects the healthy aspects of human development and enhances the coping skills of those that are less resilient. It is an approach that focuses on strength.

The negative effects of socio-economic stressors far outweigh the challenges the latter present (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Ramey et al., 1998; Seccombe, 2002). Interventions should always strive to facilitate a resilient response in victims. However, it is equally important to eliminate poverty altogether by becoming familiar with the causes of poverty and the systems and economic policies that maintain it.

Two further possible studies are indicated: one that compares those who are resilient in this particular community with those who were not so successful; and a second that interviews participants at five-year intervals (making this study a longitudinal one) and continuing to assess how participants maintain resiliency.

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