

Inaugural lecture

Vulnerable, but invincible?

Ecosystemic pathways to South African youths' resilience

by

PROF DR LC THERON

Professor in the School of Education Sciences

In the Faculty of Humanities at the

Vaal Triangle Campus, North-West University

21 October 2011

Vaal Triangle Occasional Papers: Inaugural lecture 8/2011
Vanderbijlpark
2011

Printed by: The Platinum Press
North-West University
Vaal Triangle Campus

October 2011

ISBN 978-1-86822-608-5

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introduction	1
2. Resilience defined	1 - 2
3. Pathways to resilience	3 - 8
4. Gaps in our understandings of resilience	8 - 10
5. Meaning making: An ecosystemic pathway to resilience among South African youth	10 - 20
6. Conclusions	21 - 23
7. Reference list	24 - 29

Vulnerable, but invincible?

Ecosystemic pathways to South African youths' resilience

The earliest studies of resilience (Anthony & Cohler, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982) posited that resilient young people were “vulnerable, but invincible” (Werner, 1996) or even “invulnerable” (Anthony & Cohler, 1987). At this initial stage in the study of resilience, this assertion that young people were indestructible, despite being placed at risk by adversities such as poverty, marginalisation, or pathologically ill parents, was not questioned. While the focus on young people’s strengths was a welcome change from decades of medical-model-like focusing on deficits and pathology, conceptualising young people who adjusted well to risk as quasi-superheroes was, and is, problematic. Thus, the aim of my address tonight is to review how the study of resilience has progressed to the point where we can question the notion of unbreakable young people and, more importantly, comprehend resilience as a bidirectional transaction between young people and their ecologies. The significance of this more recent transactional-ecosystemic understanding of resilience has direct implications for how we as South Africans conceptualise and promote the protective processes necessary to support changes in life trajectories from risk to adaptation.

RESILIENCE DEFINED

Simply put, resilience is the capacity to do well in life, despite significant adversity (Masten, 2001). In other words, to describe someone as resilient, **two** criteria must be present:

- i. There must be **significant threat**, which puts the person at risk for a negative outcome (such as suicide, depression, criminal behaviour, etc.) or interrupts normative development. Thus, in the absence of adversity, resilience cannot be construed. Adversity is most often understood to mean psychosocial hardship (for example, poverty, parental divorce, orphanhood, chronically ill parents, social marginalisation, etc.) or trauma (for example, being a prisoner of war, rape and other sexual abuse, experiencing a natural disaster, brutal crime, etc.). Adversity can also be biological (for example, chronically poor health, disability,

etc.). Most typically, however, the risks that leave young people vulnerable are compound risks (for example, social marginalisation and chronic ill health). When risks accumulate, the chances of negative outcomes or arrested development increase (Goldstein & Brooks, 2006).

AND

- ii. The person must **adapt well to significant risk** or show positive development that was not expected, given the risk(s) present in his or her lifeworld, or given the “major assaults on the developmental process” (Cicchetti, 2010, p. 145). Therefore, resilience cannot be synonymous with concepts such as coping, or well-being, or competence, or good mental health (Rutter, 2010), all of which do not require significant risk to be present. Precisely what positive adjustment connotes, however, is complex because of its variability across individuals, contexts, cultures, and developmental stages. So, for example, adapting well to poverty in a township in South Africa might be demonstrated in an adolescent’s progress at school and determination to pursue tertiary studies, but adapting well to poverty in Ethiopia might be evident in the adolescent’s leaving school to help the family farm or earn a living. Likewise, Werner and Smith (1992) reported that some troubled adolescents, who had adjusted poorly to the adversities challenging them in this developmental phase, turned their lives around as young adults. Thus, positive adjustment needs to be understood as a dynamic phenomenon that varies over time and across ecologies (Masten & Wright, 2010).

Although most resilience researchers will agree on the above definition of resilience (that is, positive adjustment in the face of adversity), the fluidity of the phenomenon of resilience has spawned ongoing debate about how best to conceptualise and measure resilience (Glantz & Sloboda, 1999; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Wright, 2010; Ungar, 2011). The details of these deliberations are, however, beyond the scope of this address, and so, for the purposes of tonight’s lecture, I will use the aforementioned definition of resilience.

PATHWAYS TO RESILIENCE

Orientation

Why is it that many young people do well in life, despite being challenged by significant difficulties? The studies that led to the christening of the phenomenon of positive adjustment as *resilience* were not concerned with the aforementioned question. Instead, these studies were preoccupied with investigating reduced functioning in children whose parents were schizophrenics or who were growing up marginalised and poor. When, by chance, researchers discovered children who were functioning well, despite their adverse circumstances, this "... subset of patients who showed relatively adaptive patterns were considered atypical and afforded little attention" (Cicchetti, 2010, p. 146). Nevertheless, growing evidence of children who adjusted well, despite life conditions synonymous with elevated risk, commanded the scientific study of what was then still considered an aberration. Thus, about four decades ago, the study of resilience began in earnest.

As noted at the outset, early resilience researchers attributed positive adjustment to qualities in the individual that encouraged him or her to be "invulnerable" (Anthony & Cohler, 1987). Traits (such as optimism or assertiveness), or skills (such as problem solving or self-regulation), or even genes (such as high intelligence or good physical health) were reported as individual pathways to resilience (see Table 1 below). One great danger in this conceptualisation was that individuals who did not resile were mistakenly blamed for their vulnerability. Simultaneously, their ecologies were not held responsible for collaborating in processes of positive adjustment (Ungar, 2011).

However, in time, researchers recognised that humans were psychosocial beings embedded in ecosystemic ecologies (Donald, Larazus, & Lolwana, 2010), and so this prioritisation of intrapersonal resources was not prolonged. Resilience researchers went on to report that resilience resulted from a triad of protective factors (Luthar et al., 2000), found in the individual, his/her family, and his/her environment or, from the perspective of systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), factors found within the sub-systems of a given ecology or, then, "ecosystemic" factors (Donald et al., 2010). Later, researchers added cultural protective factors to this triad (Wright & Masten, 2006).

Although many of the studies that described the protective resources of resilience were criticised for following imperfect methodologies, most studies pointed to the same intra- and interpersonal protective resources (Cicchetti, 2010; Masten & Wright, 2010), as summarised in Tables 1 and 2 below. Many of these resources were reported in association with resilient South African youth, too (Theron & Theron, 2010). Their classification as “protective” related to the then understanding that these resources protected young people who were at risk of developing negative outcomes from developing maladaptively (Wright & Masten, 2006). Most significantly, Masten (2001) pointed out that these protective resources were quite commonplace, leading to her famous oxymoron of “ordinary magic” (p. 227), which highlighted the ordinariness of the resources needed to support processes of resilience. However, as Luthar (2006) noted, how ordinary are protective resources such as good parenting, or humour, or positive peers really, when families, individuals, and communities are challenged by chronic or ruthless threat?

Table 1: Examples of intrapersonal protective resources

(Kumpfer, 1999; Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009; Werner, 2006; Wright & Masten, 2006)

Skills	Temperament	Genetic qualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem-solving skills • Assertiveness • Autonomy • Good interpersonal skills • Internal locus of control • Impulse control • Emotional regulation • Behavioural regulation • Planning skills • Social maturity • Flexibility • Positive meaning making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of humour • Sunny temperament • Tenacity • Positive self-concept • Positive attitude • Positive emotion • Drive • Enthusiasm • Hopefulness/positive future orientation • Affectionate • Achievement orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractiveness • Good health • Intelligence • Birth order • Special talents

Table 2: Examples of interpersonal protective resources

(Kumpfer, 1999; Masten et al., 2009; Werner, 2006)

Family	Community	Culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small families• Socio-economically advantaged families• Competent mothers• Positive attachments (particularly to primary caregiver)• Supportive grandparents• Supportive siblings• Consistent and positive parenting practices• Parental harmony• Ordered home atmosphere• Educated parents• Interested parents• Family traditions• Security and sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supportive and pro-social peers• Supportive teachers• Effective schools• Effective public health services• Effective social services• Positive school experiences• Mentors (elders)• Pro-social organisations (for example, sports clubs, youth groups)• Safe neighbourhoods• Cohesive neighbourhoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cultural belonging• Religious/spiritual practices• Positive values/belief systems

In 2004, Gunnestad suggested that these protective resources be conceptualised slightly differently as internal supports (that is, resilience-promoting abilities and skills in the individual), external supports (that is, resilience-promoting networks), and existential supports (that is, meaning, values, and faith). He did not add culture as a protective resource, but argued that internal, external, and existential supports for resilience were embedded in culture. In his words, "Culture is what is infiltrated in all the three main categories". In other words, depending on the culture in which an individual is situated, certain abilities and skills might be more highly valued, networks formed differently, and certain values, spiritual practices, and meaning making encouraged above others.

Nevertheless, a description of protective factors, regardless of their nomenclature, did not offer an explanation for *how* resilience occurred or of its complex, dynamic nature. As Rutter (1989) pointed out, why was it that some young people did not adjust positively to adversity, despite the presence of protective resources? The same gap (that is, a limited understanding of resilience as a process) was noted for South African studies of resilience between 1990 and 2008 (Theron & Theron, 2010). Moreover, listing the resources believed to modify the impacts of high risk masked the complex nature of such protective resources. These resources could potentially encourage or discourage resilience, depending on numerous factors, including, *inter alia*, developmental stage, race, gender, and so forth (Luthar, 2006). For example, strong mother-child bonds could promote resilience in childhood, provided that the mother was well adjusted, but decelerate positive adjustment during adolescence, if the relationship was prescriptively close and prohibitive of emancipative development. Likewise, could researchers assume homogeneity of protective resources across contexts and cultures (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Glantz & Sloboda, 1999; Ungar, 2008; Ungar, 2010)? In the absence of understanding of, and respect for, the complexity of the process of resilience, the design of developmentally, contextually, and culturally sensitive resilience-promoting prevention and intervention strategies was hamstrung. Thus, researchers' pursuit of an understanding of the processes, or mechanisms, of resilience began.

Understanding resilience as a transactional-ecological process

Many models of resilience were proposed (see Masten et al., 2009, for a detailed review of the variable-focused, person-focused, pathway, and transactional models of resilience), but of these, transactional-ecological explanations became most popular. Transactional understandings of resilience interpreted the resilience process as a bidirectional give and take (Lerner, 2006). This means that, for positive adjustment to take place, individuals engage in processes that promote adjustment; simultaneously, the ecology in which the individual is situated influences and supports these processes (Felner, 2006; Greene & Livingston, 2001; Wright & Masten, 2006) in culturally congruent ways (Ungar, 2011). Ungar (2008, p. 225) explained this transactional-ecological process as follows:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways.

Thus, the process of resilience is underpinned by actions, reactions, and interactions, or "transactions" (see Sameroff, 2009; 2010) that take place within, and are supported by, a specific ecology (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or ecosystem (Donald et al., 2010). This makes resilience a dynamic, bidirectional process that depends on young people and their ecologies (Lerner, 2006; Ungar, 2011). It also means that resilience cannot then be described as something an individual possesses, but rather as a developmental process that will vary across contexts, cultures, and/or time (Cicchetti, 2010; Masten & Wright, 2010; Ungar 2011). For example, Rutter's seminal study (1987) of women who had been institutionalised as children suggested that later life choices, particularly with regard to a life partner, encouraged resilience in adult life. When these women, considered at risk of non-resilience, experienced marital relationships that offered them warm, harmonious, supportive attachments, they adjusted well to adult life and motherhood. Likewise, Werner and Smith (1992) reported that adolescents who had been considered at risk of maladaptive life outcomes demonstrated resilience as young adults, particularly when marriage or a long-term committed relationship, or work opportunities, or continued education offered them second chances and escape from adversity. Thus, researchers began to understand that processes informing resilience varied across time.

Masten and Wright (2010) reviewed the most common resilience-promoting transactions across the lifespan. Most typically, these included processes of positive attachment (or the formation of healthy relationships), self-regulation (or socially congruent adjustment of emotion and behaviour), agency and mastery (or actions that supported positive coping and concomitant experiences of achievement and positive self-esteem), meaning making (or making sense of adversity), and problem solving (or the constructive use of own intelligence and networks to resolve difficulty). Each of these processes is underpinned by multilevel protective resources (see Tables 1 and 2).

None of these processes was prioritised, although Luthar (2006) did suggest that relationships were the most decisive pathway to resilience.

Increasingly, researchers began to emphasise that resilience-promoting processes were nuanced by context. For example, Wright and Masten (2006) reported research findings of a study by Cicchetti and Rogosch that showed that children who were resilient to maltreatment formed fewer attachments than resilient children in different contexts. Likewise, Werner and Smith (1992) reported that children from dysfunctional families were resilient partly because they did not form attachments to their parents. Equally, researchers began to emphasise that the culture of a given ecology shaped resilience-promoting transactions. For example, young people who grew up in very religious communities were socialised towards hopefulness and reported a sense of belonging to a close-knit community, both of which supported them to make more hopeful meaning of their life events (Masten & Wright, 2010).

Finally, the growing conceptualisation of resilience as a dynamic process shared by individuals and their ecologies has led to evidence-based intervention and prevention strategies. Researchers around the globe are engaged in research projects that test, explore, and evaluate how research findings can be translated into policy and practice that could, and should ultimately, offer at-risk individuals and communities second chances (Cicchetti, 2010; Masten & Wright, 2010). As such, evaluation studies take positive adjustment further by exploring how best to promote adaptation in the face of risk and by simultaneously potentially investing in those who elect to participate in these studies (Masten, 2007). In South Africa, the Resilient Educators study (REds) (Theron, Geyer, Strydom, & Delpport, 2008), the Read-me-to-Resilience study (Theron, 2010), and Supportive Teachers, Assets and Resilience (STAR) (Ebersöhn, Ferreira, & Mbongwe, 2011) are examples of the application of resilience theories towards enabling practices.

GAPS IN OUR UNDERSTANDINGS OF RESILIENCE

Although our understanding of resilience has progressed significantly since early conceptions of resilience as a person-centred construct, there are still multiple unanswered questions and underexplored facets. For example, with the advent of

modern technology, such as neuro-imaging, researchers have begun to investigate neurobiological influences integral to the processes of resilience (Cicchetti, 2010; Cicchetti & Curtis, 2006). These investigations are alerting resilience researchers to the fact that multilevel understandings are necessary if the complexity of resilience is to be comprehended. For instance, in a neural-level study of physically maltreated but resilient children, Cicchetti and Rogosch (2007) reported that the resilient children had higher morning levels of cortisol that appeared to encourage self-regulation. In comparison, higher morning levels of cortisol in other children (that is, those not exposed to physical maltreatment) correlated with lower resilience. In a different study, Curtis and Cicchetti (2007) conducted a multilevel investigation of hemispheric asymmetry in resilience and reported that maltreated but resilient children showed greater left-hemispheric activity. The left hemisphere of the brain is traditionally associated with positive emotion, and positive emotion has long been associated with resilience. Furthermore, research into the neurobiology of resilience has emphasised brain plasticity or neurobiological reorganisation, as well as gene-environment interactions, thereby marshalling a transactional understanding of resilience (Cicchetti, 2010). In other words, modern investigations of resilience continue to promote more holistic understandings of resilience, but also to alert us to how little we know of the biology of resilience. In South Africa, in particular, the psychology of resilience is much better understood than the biology of resilience. This is a deficit begging to be righted.

Another gap pertains to understanding how cultural contexts nuance resilience processes. Most of the classical studies (see Werner, 2006, for a summary of these) that have shaped resilience theory have been conducted with children in minority-world settings that are characterised by North American or Eurocentric (that is, Western) cultural systems. If resilience depends on contextually and culturally meaningful transactions, dare researchers assume that the processes of resilience will be identical across contexts and cultures, or should they heed the calls towards contextually and culturally sensitive understandings of positive adjustment (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Glantz & Sloboda, 1999; Masten & Wright, 2010; Phasha, 2010; Theron & Theron, 2010; Ungar, 2011)? Should we as South Africans – whether we are teachers, mental health practitioners, service providers, policy makers, parents, religious leaders, or community

elders – risk assuming that the resilience of our youth can be explained using studies conducted with non-Africans (Theron & Donald, in press)?

To illustrate why it would be imprudent to simply adopt Western-based explanations of the mechanisms of resilience, I will draw on recent South African studies of resilience that report how our youths' resilience processes are nuanced by context and culture. I will also draw on qualitative research from two current studies (the *Pathways to Resilience*ⁱ study and *Retrospective Reflections on Resilience*ⁱⁱ) in which I am involved to counsel against incautious generalisation of findings from non-African studies and to highlight the complexity of the mechanisms of resilience. Given the time constraints of an inaugural lecture, I limit this illustration to the processes of meaning making.

MEANING MAKING: AN ECOSYSTEMIC PATHWAY TO RESILIENCE AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH

Making meaning of life and/or finding meaning in life are complex processes that include making sense of what happens in life and perceiving that life (or adversity) has a purpose (Steger, 2009). This often involves actively reappraising an event or phenomenon and choosing an interpretation. Part of this interpretation might be a bid to understand the event or phenomenon in terms of belief systems. Another part might relate to trying to find benefits in hardship (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2010). In the process of resilience, cultural values, beliefs, and practices offer opportunities and guidelines for meaning making (Luthar, 2006; Masten & Wright, 2010; Theron, 2007; Theron & Theron, 2010).

Studies of resilient South African adolescents have reported that, typically, these youths make positive meaning of challenging life events and adverse circumstances (such as sexual abuse, parental divorce, and homelessness) (Phasha, 2010; Theron & Dunn, 2010; Theron & Malindi, 2010). In these prior studies, positive meaning making was encouraged by the value and belief systems of the cultural groups to which adolescents belonged. For example, white Afrikaans-speaking youths reported that it was easier for them to steer towards resilient outcomes because divorce had become fairly commonplace in Afrikaans-speaking families and because they had no real control over their home circumstances (Theron & Dunn, 2010). Because their cultural group

accepted divorce as a reality, the youth participating in the study reported that they did not feel stereotyped or judged, and this encouraged them to adjust to their changed home lives. Furthermore, these young people reported that they had been socialised to believe that suffering was universal and to respect patriarchal child-rearing customs that mandated youth acceptance of parental decisions. This helped them not to blame themselves, which, in turn, facilitated positive adjustment. Likewise, Phasha (2010) associated the resilience of her participants with the African *Ubuntu* value system, which encouraged respect for fellow human beings and discouraged the holding of grudges. Allegiance to this value system encouraged her female participants to forgive the people who had abused them sexually, and this, in turn, freed the participants to move forward in life. Phasha also emphasised that the Africentric emphasis on education as a means to a better future provided these young women with the way forward. Studies of resilience among black street youth (Theron & Malindi, 2010) suggested that resilient youth could accept and/or tolerate their life experiences without blaming themselves or bearing grudges. For the street youth, this tolerant meaning making was associated with the steeling effects (Rutter, 2006) of traditional rites (such as traditional circumcision) and cultural pride following the turn in South Africa's political tide in 1994.

In their ongoing *Retrospective Reflections on Resilience* study aimed at understanding the processes of resilience in contexts of poverty, Theron and Theron's (2011) participants (all successful, black university students with an average age of 26 years) reported that they had learnt to make positive meaning of indigence and its associated hardships. Essentially, this process was facilitated by their attachments to grandparents, older siblings, their ancestors, and/or God. Their belonging to this network offered the opportunity to revise their initial understandings of their poverty, reframe poverty as temporary, and accept hardship stoically. When asked to illustrate their process of resilience, most participants included their grandparents and older siblings, as well as deceased relatives, in this visualisation (see, for example, Figure 1 below):

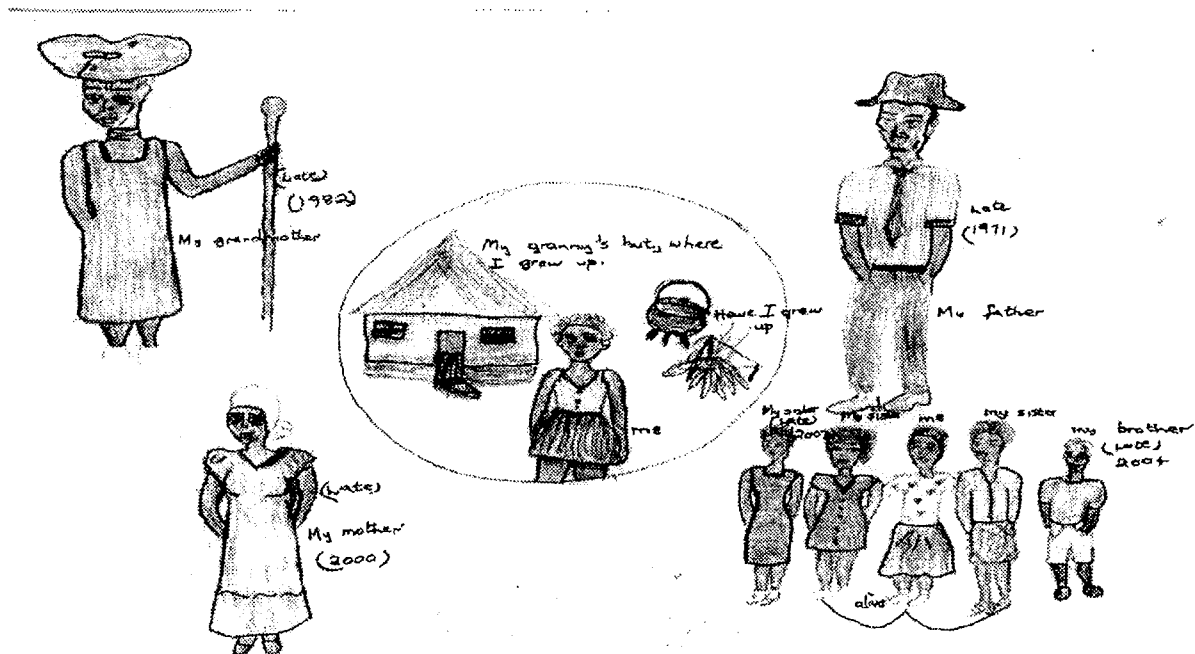


Figure 1 Extended family networks supported positive adjustment

In addition to their belonging to an extended family network (present and deceased), many of the participants alluded to traditional practices, such as story telling, as integral to their process of making meaning. Although all participants reported poverty as a complex risk, which entailed not only knowing extended periods of hunger, but also marginalisation, disempowerment, and humiliation, they reported that their grandparents' stories of lived childhood hardships had prompted revised perspectives of their own hardship. For example, a young man related the following:

Every time, even if we didn't have food in the house, we would sit down and she [grandmother] would come up with stories. She would tell us very hard stories, because she didn't want us to think this is the hard life, so she told us the worst stories whereby they couldn't even eat for the week. When she was growing up, they had to travel distances of about 40-50 km just to get to work and then travel back home, sometimes they walked almost all night to get to home, and the following morning they must go again. So if you think of that, you think yoh, yoh, yoh, this is not a hard life ... So from those stories that's when we base ourselves.

Likewise, a second young man who had been raised by his grandmother in a remote mountainous area told the following: “At some point I used to say, ‘I’m suffering, yeh, I’m suffering!’ But my Granny’s stories – when she told me, uh, her stories during her times of her suffering, then I realised no, this is a, it’s a little thing (laughs).”

Strong attachment to God and/or ancestral figures encouraged resilience when these attachments supported young people to view their impecunious circumstances as temporary and manageable. For example, a young man, who not only battled crippling poverty, but also had to contend with an abusive father, learned via his religious faith to reconsider his suffering as both temporary and manageable:

Um, when I accepted Jesus Christ, that’s when I started to define myself, that’s when I got to know how to define myself without using material things, but to find the real me. I am not my clothes, I am not my situation. What I’m going through is just a preparation ... to build me for greater things that will come ... I am not where I come from. I am who I am, and what God has made me to be. I don’t care what you say about me because it will not change anything about me ... I’m fearfully and wonderfully made. I am made for a purpose. The reason why I’m in the situation is because I can handle that situation. So, I started to understand that [this] situation is not there permanently, but it’s just there just to, for a, a certain period of time ...

In the *Pathways to Resilience* study (which is also ongoing), most adolescents reported similar beliefs that, with God, they could triumph over any odds (see Figure 2 below). This belief prompted them to make positive meaning and to remain hopeful.



Figure 2 Belief in God supported positive meaning making

Participants in the *Retrospective Reflections on Resilience* study reported that attachment to God and/or ancestors was mostly taught by grandparents or older siblings. For example, a young man related that his attachment to God helped him maintain hope that the hardships he faced were not immutable. However, it was his older brother who had introduced him to God:

He [older brother] took over from my grandma – I think she died maybe three years after he was working. We just stayed with our brother. He made sure that there butter on the table and clothing, school fees and other things like that. ... In the process like, of our sufferings, my brother became a Christian and then he introduced this thing into the family. And then, that's when I started seeing things differently.

When grandparents passed on, some resilient youth perceived a sustained connection to them. In most instances, the youth tied this belief to what they had been taught about ancestors as potential sources of existential support. Their belief in this support helped them to believe that their hardship would pass:

Participant: In spirit I'm still with him [deceased grandfather] ... because maybe when I am in trouble, or I am scared, or something, I just say ... I just pray ... he taught me. I just say 'Our Father,' and I just talk to him: 'wherever you are, if you are still looking out for me, please help me to go through this ... Amen.'

Interviewer: And what happens then?

Participant: Then eventually things just come right.

Interviewer: And why do you think they come right?

Participant: I think he is with me. I think he is helping me. 'Cause, I am also, when I am talking to him, I say: 'Even if it does not go the way I want, just give me strength to accept that things did not go the way I wanted it to go' ... I ask him to just give me that power to accept that I failed and that I can't change that. I have to do it again ...

In the *Pathways to Resilience* study, participants from rural QwaQwa reported similar belief in the power of their ancestors to help them manage daily hardships. For example, when young people were invited to make a model of any facet of their resilience, using the Mmogo-method™ (Roos, 2008), a number of them built cultural artefacts of animals, which they associated with cultural rituals that facilitated their calling on ancestors (see Figure 3 below).

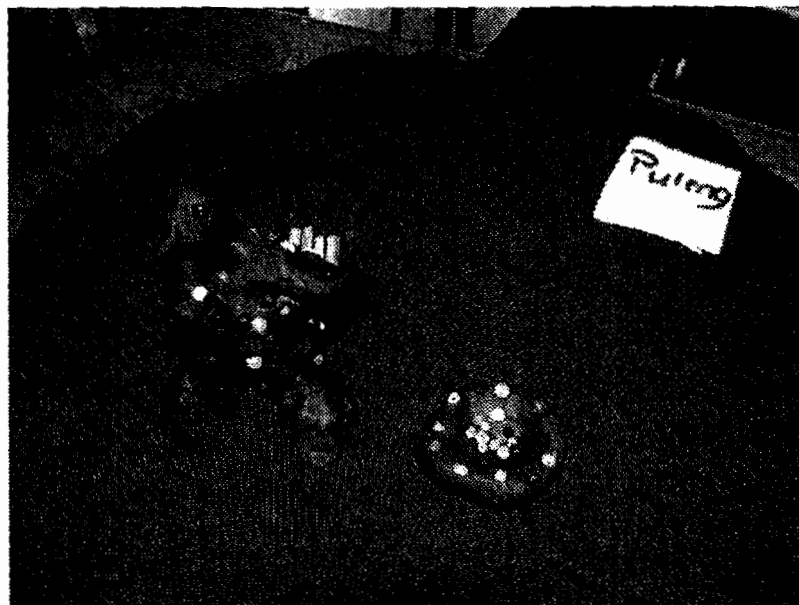


Figure 3 Ancestral rituals promoted hope

This participant explained her model as follows:

Participant: It represents my culture – cultural beliefs. These are ancestral ceremonies so that the ancestors can come and heal me. Just knowing that I can be healed and be able to continue with my life, go to school, ... it keeps me

strong. Not only when you are ill but also when you are looking for a job, the ancestors can also help.

Research team member: Who taught you about the ancestors?

Participant: My grandmother tells us stories about ancestors. She taught us that even when you are a Christian you mustn't forget about the ancestors because they can still help.

In both the *Retrospective Reflections on Resilience* and *Pathways to Resilience* studies, educational aspirations supported participants to see an end to their poverty. Passing well at school and gaining access to university were considered a foothold to an upward trajectory. In many instances, grandparents – most of whom were illiterate – urged youth to make the most of their educational opportunities so that they could have access to a life with less poverty-related suffering. For example, a young man, who had been raised by his grandmother, reported how she had encouraged him to look beyond their current hardship and how she saw schooling as integral to him building a better life for himself:

My grandmother is – she was like a mother to me, a friend, and she was rational. ... I mean, she always wanted us to – though she couldn't read and write – she would always ask us to pass at school ... 'cause I mean she believed in education. She will influence you to study and say 'Don't be like your mom'.

Multiple participants in the *Pathways to Resilience* study conveyed similar stories about how their grandmothers had emphasised the importance of educational aspirations, as illustrated in the drawing below (see Figure 4):



Figure 4 Grandmothers emphasised the importance of education as a means to a better future

Resilient participants in the *Retrospective Reflections on Resilience* study reported a stoical acceptance of their hardship. In many instances, their grandparents, or peers facing similar odds, had modelled comparable acceptance. For example, a young man, who had spent his childhood in the mountains of Lesotho where he had had to herd his uncle's cattle in order to supplement his single mother's income, reflected as follows:

When we were in the veld [fields] we met other boys who did the same thing that I was doing – they were maybe from another village and then they came to this village just to do work and get paid ... so they were never treated good. Whenever we were in the veld we got together and we just talked ... where I stay they give me this, where I stay they give me that. We interacted, we played, we swam, we did everything together – so we became a family. So the ones that went to school, they were friends; and the ones that look after cattle were friends.

So we were two groups. And we regarded ourselves as the strong ones and not mammas' babies and that made us realise that we are growing stronger ... Yes, there was nothing we could do. If we didn't accept we would have done every day angry in our hearts. So we just accepted that we were strong and everything just became simple.

Likewise, in the *Pathways to Resilience* project, resilient adolescents illustrated acceptance of penury, but emphasised that it was an interim condition because they cherished dreams of a better future. The youth accepted hardship because they were working towards realising these dreams of tertiary education and professional employment, as illustrated in the drawing below (see Figure 5):

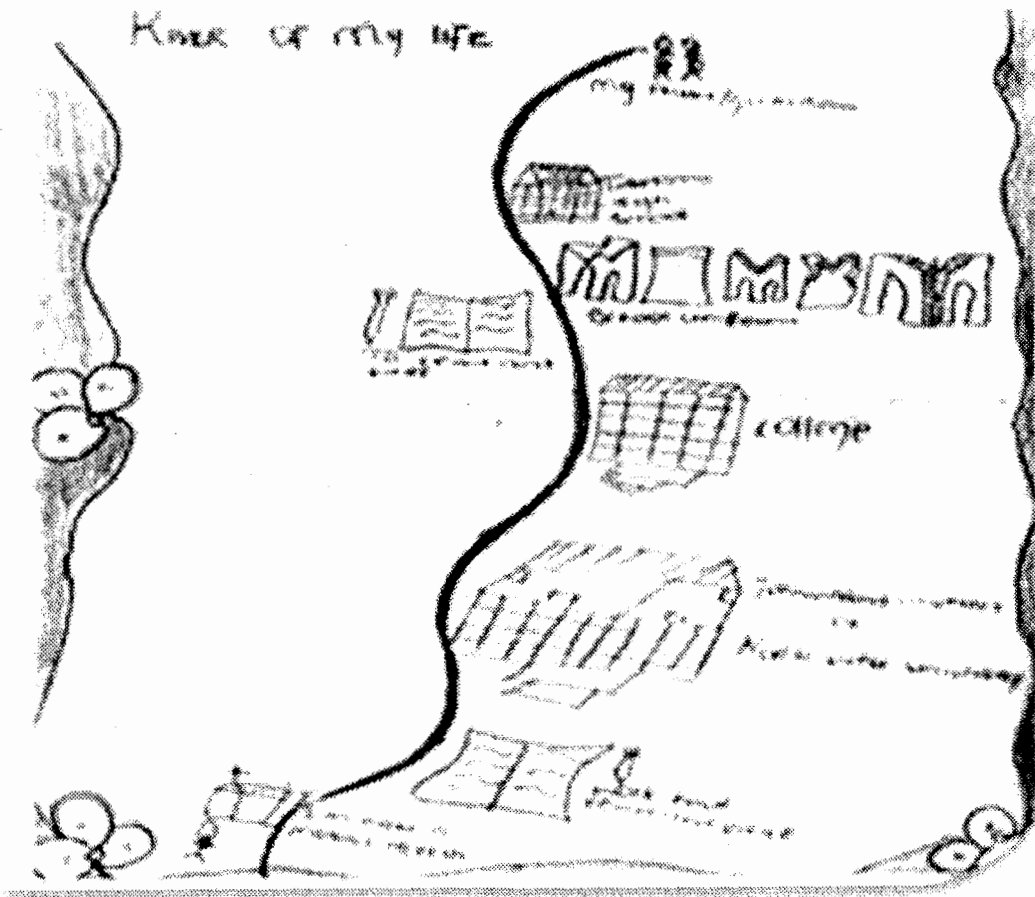


Figure 5 Future dreams made untenable hardship bearable

Implications for Understanding Local Resilience Processes

In all of the above examples, the participants had been raised in contexts that socialised them to respect traditional Africentric values, beliefs, and practices. While it is short-sighted to suggest a homogeneous Africentric culture, it is possible to identify core features of Africentric culture (Lesejane, 2006). These include strong spiritual (religious and ancestral), kinship, and collectivist beliefs and practices (Mkhize, 2006; Murove, 2009; Prozesky, 2009) that encourage deep respect for human relatedness (Munyaka & Motlhabi, 2009). Part of such relatedness finds expression in kinship practices or “a family community” (Mkhize, 2006, p. 187) and acceptance of children in the extended family as a collective responsibility. In such communities, older people (such as grandparents) are respected and often function as surrogate parents for absent, working, or deceased biological parents. In these communities, children have little influence, but are secure and are socialised to be spiritual and dutiful towards elders and ancestors, and to esteem collectivist values (Lesejane, 2006).

What might we glean from the above examples? Very few international studies of resilience have reported grandparents or ancestors as instrumental to resilience. Werner and Smith (1992; 2001) reported grandparents as facilitative of resilience processes, but most Western resilience studies reported biological parents (Masten & Wright, 2010, p. 223). Prior studies of resilience among African American youth associated strong religious beliefs with positive adjustment to hardship (Kumpfer, 1999, p. 199), but ancestral support has not been explicitly reported in Western literature. Thus, we are reminded that the resources supporting resilience and the processes of resilience are nuanced by the cultural context in which they occur. These emerging findings echo Masten’s voice: positive attachments and constructive meaning making are “ordinary magic” (2001, p. 227). At the same time, they illustrate that, for the participants in the studies reported on, this “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2001, p. 227) was coloured by our African context and Africentric culture. This discourages non-critical acceptance of theories of resilience generated in Eurocentric or American contexts.

More importantly, these emerging findings highlight the multilevel complexity of resilience processes (see Figure 6 below). In these examples, the Africentric cultural

context encouraged here and now attachments (to grandparents and/or older siblings) and existential attachments (to God and/or ancestors). These connections offered spaces in which youth learnt culturally congruent spiritual practices and values that prompted positive meaning making. They also offered spaces in which youth, commensurate with African oral tradition, could listen to stories that encouraged reframing of hardship, stoical acceptance of it, and concomitant pursuit of education. The youth made constructive use of these spaces, and acted on the insights offered to them. In essence, this revised meaning making prompted stoical acceptance of what could not be altered in the interim, while doggedly pursuing long-term goals that would potentiate an improved future. As such, culturally congruent attachments and associated appraisals encouraged a process of equanimity. This process of equanimity is entwined in the youths' Africentric ecosystemic situatedness. Thus, although the youth in these ongoing studies reported more typically Western attachments, too (for example, to mothers, teachers, and peers), and other resilience-promoting processes (such as self-regulation and mastery) (Masten & Wright, 2010), these emerging findings sensitise us to the culturally sensitive ecosystemic rootedness of pathways to resilience. In this sense, these emerging findings synthesize Gunnestad's (2004) theory that culture infiltrates protective resources and Masten and Wright's (2010) review of resilience-promoting processes: the process of meaning-making was rooted in these youths' collectivist cultures and extended family system attachments. They also urge us to search for indigenous processes of resilience, like equanimity (Theron & Theron, 2011), that may not be reported in the Western literature. Intervention and prevention strategies that fail to acknowledge this multilevel, culturally nuanced, embedded complexity will offer piecemeal support at best.

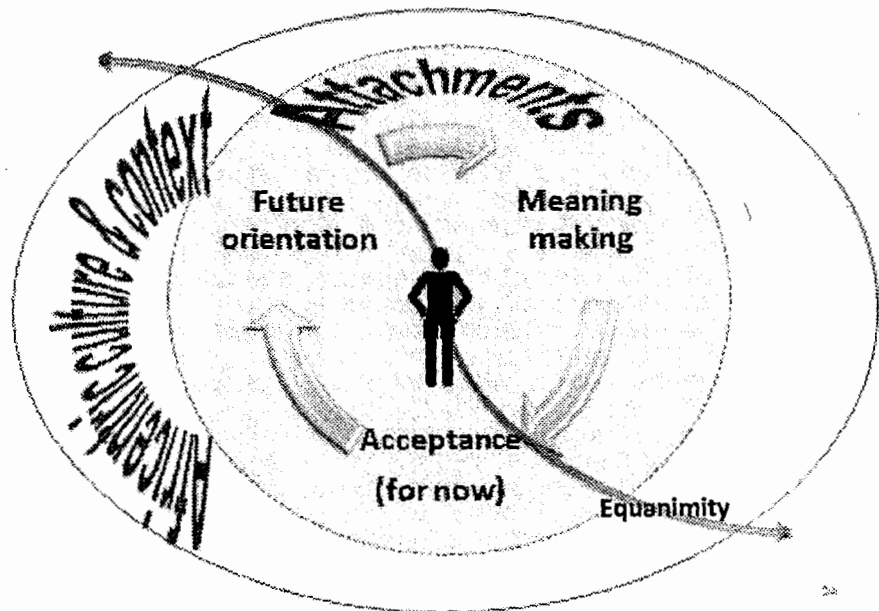


Figure 6 Equanimity: An ecosystemic pathway to resilience

CONCLUSIONS

Extant research on how young people resile in the face of significant threat reminds us that the mechanisms of resilience are embedded in changeable, person \leftrightarrow context (Lerner, 2006) transactions, which involve both neural and psychological self-organisation (Curtis & Cicchetti, 2007; Luthar, 2006; Masten & Wright, 2010), and are sensitive to contextual and cultural influences. Although there appear to be generic pathways to resilience, these may not obfuscate ecosystemically nuanced pathways (Theron et al., 2011; Theron & Theron, 2010). The above examples drawn from prior and ongoing South African studies of resilience bear out this warning.

An acceptance of resilience as a culturally congruent collaboration between young people and their ecologies implies that youth can no longer be blamed for vulnerability. Instead, families, peer networks, school and university communities, neighbourhoods, religious circles, NGOs, Government, and other systems become co-responsible for the positive adjustment of young people challenged by significant adversity. Rather than merely celebrate qualities in at-risk young people that support them to defy the odds and navigate towards health and well-being, a social-ecological understanding of

resilience (Ungar, 2011) dictates that ecologies mobilise support for at-risk youth, be this preventative or remedial. It also emphasises the importance of ecosystemically relevant supports, premised on local evidence of biological, psychological, and sociocultural pathways to resilience.

Furthermore, a pressing need for further research flows from the acceptance of resilience as a culturally and contextually impressionable construct, particularly in our South African context, not just because we are a culturally diverse nation (Theron & Theron, 2010), but also because culture and context are fluid (Donald et al., 2010). The latter emphasises the importance of longitudinal studies of how cultural persuasions inform, and might inform, resilience. It commands many questions: What is South African culture? Are the pathways to resilience different for youth with dissimilar ethnic roots, or is Jansen's (2009) suggestion that people are more similar than they believe true for the resilience processes of South African youth, too? How will changing ecosystems influence positive adjustment in generations to come? How will future generations of youth resile, especially in a social context challenged by HIV/Aids, with its disruption of attachment relationships? How will prospective cohorts of acculturated South Africans marshal support towards positive adjustment?

There is no lifespan understanding of resilience among South Africans at present. This, too, urges longitudinal research agendas, also in terms of cultural and contextual influences across time. If youth participants in current studies of resilience are followed across their lifetime, will the processes that they report remain unchanged? Will they continue to cling to educational aspirations as stepping stones to a better future if schools and universities continue to fail South African youth? Will they continue to value existential attachments if churches fail to embrace a younger generation or if families and communities devalue traditional spiritual beliefs? How will resilient adolescents and students navigate and negotiate towards competence when they encounter difficult, subsequent periods as professionals, partners, parents, and later geriatrics, and how will their cultural persuasions influence this journey?

Lastly, an understanding of resilience as a reciprocal, dynamic process allows a cogent and concise answer to the question in the title of this address. Vulnerable, but

invincible? No. Vulnerable, unless partnered towards positive adjustment? Yes. Quintessentially, if we as South Africans wish to promote future generations of youth that might begin to approximate the indomitability alluded to at the outset of resilience research almost half a century ago, then we need to accept co-responsibility for our share in this. Such collaboration commands mobilisation of “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2001, p. 227), in ways that respect youth contexts and cultures, towards youth resilience. This is not an impossible dream – if it is shared.

Reference list

- Anthony, E. J., & Cohler, B. J. (1987). *The invulnerable child*. New York, NY: Guilford Press
- Baumgardner, S. R., & Crothers, M. K. (2010). *Positive psychology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cicchetti, D. (2010). Resilience under conditions of extreme stress: A multilevel perspective. *World Psychiatry, 9*, 145-154.
- Cicchetti, D., & Curtis, W. J. (2006). The developing brain and neural plasticity: Implications for normality, psychopathology and resilience. In D. Cicchetti & D. J. Cohen (Eds.), *Developmental Psychopathology: Developmental neuroscience* (2nd ed., pp. 1-64). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Cicchetti, D., & Rogosch, F. A. (2007). Personality, adrenal steroid hormones, and resilience in maltreated children: A multi-level perspective. *Development and Psychopathology, 19*, 787-809.
- Clauss-Ehlers, C. S. (2008). Sociocultural factors, resilience, and coping. Support for a culturally sensitive measure of resilience. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 29* (3), 197-212. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2008.02.004.
- Curtis, W. J., & Cicchetti, D. (2007). Emotion and resilience: A multilevel of investigation of hemispheric electroencephalogram asymmetry and emotion regulation in maltreated and nonmaltreated children. *Development and Psychopathology, 19*, 811-840. doi: 10.1017/S0954579407000405.
- Donald, D., Lazarus, S., & Lolwana, P. (2010). *Educational psychology in social context. Ecosystemic applications in southern Africa* (4th ed.). Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press.
- Ebersöhn, L., Ferreira, R., & Mbongwe, B. (2011). How teacher-researcher teams see their role in participatory research. In L. C. Theron, C. Mitchell, J. Stuart, & A. Smith (Eds.),

- Picturing research: Drawings as visual methodology* (pp. 163-176). Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Felner, R. D. (2006). Poverty in childhood and adolescence. A transactional-ecological approach to understanding and enhancing resilience in contexts of disadvantage and developmental risk. In S. Goldstein & R. B. Brooks (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children* (pp. 125-147). New York, NY: Springer.
- Glantz, M. D., & Sloboda, Z. (1999). Analysis and reconceptualization of resilience. In M. D. Glantz & J. Johnson (Eds.), *Resilience and development: Positive life adaptations* (pp. 109-128). New York, N.Y.: Plenum.
- Goldstein, S., & Brooks, R. B. (2006). Why study resilience? In S. Goldstein & R. B. Brooks (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children* (pp. 3-15). New York, NY: Springer.
- Greene, R. R., & Livingston, N. C. (2001). A social construct. In R. R. Greene (Ed.), *Resiliency. An integrated approach to practice, policy, and research* (pp. 63-93). Washington, D.C.: NASW press.
- Gunnestad, A. (2004). Resilience in cross-cultural perspective: How resilience is generated in different cultures. Retrieved from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr11/gunnestad.htm>
- Jansen, J. D. (2009). *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past*. Cape Town, South Africa: UCT press.
- Kumpfer, K. L. (1999). Factors and processes contributing to resilience. The resilience framework. In M. D. Glantz & J. Johnson (Eds.), *Resilience and development: Positive life adaptations* (pp. 179-224). New York, N.Y.: Plenum.
- Lesejane, D. (2006). Fatherhood from an African cultural perspective. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa*. (pp. 173-182). Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Lerner, R. M. (2006). Resilience as an attribute of the developmental system: Comments on the papers of professors Masten & Wachs. In B. M. Lester, A. S. Masten, & B. McEwen (Eds.), *Resilience in children* (pp. 40-51). Boston, MA: Blackwell.

- Luthar, S. S. (2006). Resilience in development: A synthesis of research across five decades. In D. Cicchetti & D. J. Cohen (Eds.), *Developmental Psychopathology: Risk, disorder and adaptation* (2nd ed., pp. 739-795). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, *71*, 543-562.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, *56* (3), 227-238.
- Masten, A. S. (2007). Resilience in developing systems: Progress and promise as the fourth wave rises. *Development and Psychopathology*, *19*, 921-930.
- Masten, A. S., Cutuli, J. J., Herbers, J. E., & Reed, M. J. (2009). Resilience in development. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 117-131). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Masten, A. S., & Wright, M. O. (2010). Resilience over the lifespan: Developmental perspectives on resistance, recovery and transformation. In J. W. Reich (Ed.), *Handbook of adult resilience* (pp. 213-237). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Mkhize, N. (2006). African traditions and the social, economic and moral dimensions of fatherhood. In L. Richter & R. Morrell (Eds.), *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa* (pp. 183-198). Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC press.
- Munyaka, M., & Motlhabi, M. (2009). Ubuntu and its socio-moral significance. In M. F. Murove (Ed.), *African ethics: An anthology of comparative and applied ethics* (pp. 63-84). Scottsville, South Africa: University of Kwazulu Natal Press.
- Murove, M. F. (2009). Beyond the savage evidence ethic: A vindication of African ethics. In M. F. Murove (Ed.), *African ethics: An anthology of comparative and applied ethics* (pp. 14-32). Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Phasha, T. N. (2010). Educational resilience among African survivors of child sexual abuse in South Africa. *Journal of Black Studies*, *40* (6): 1234-1253. doi: 10.1177/0021934708327693.

- Prozesky, M. H. (2009). Cinderella, survivor and saviour: African ethics and the quest for a global ethic. In M. F. Murove (Ed.), *African ethics: An anthology of comparative and applied ethics* (pp. 3–13). Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Roos, V. (2008). The Mmogo-method™: Discovering symbolic community interactions. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 18(40), 659-668.
- Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57, 316-331.
- Rutter, M. (1989). Isle of Wight revisited: Twenty-five years of child psychiatric epidemiology. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28, 633-653.
- Rutter, M. (2006). Implication of resilience concepts for scientific understanding. In B. M. Lester, A. S. Masten, & B. McEwen (Eds.), *Resilience in children* (pp.1-12). Boston, MA: Blackwell.
- Rutter, M. (2010). *Resilience: Causal pathways and social ecology*. Keynote address delivered at Pathways to Resilience II Conference: The social ecology of resilience, Halifax, Canada, 7-11 June.
- Sameroff, A. J. (Ed.). (2009). *The transactional model of development: How children and contexts shape each other*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Sameroff, A. J. (2010). A unified theory of development: A dialectic integration of nature and nurture. *Child Development*, 81(1), 6-22.
- Steger, M. F. (2009). Meaning in life. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 679-687). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Theron, L. C. (2007). Uphenyo ngokwazi kwentsha yasemalokishini ukumelana nesimo esinzima: A South African study of resilience among township youth. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 16 (2): 357-375.

- Theron, L. C. (2010). *Read me to resilience! A quasi-experimental study aimed at the empowerment of AIDS-orphans*. Paper presented at the Pathways to Resilience II Conference, Halifax, Canada, 7-11 June.
- Theron, L. C., Cameron, C. A., Didkowsky, N., Lau, C., Liebenberg, L., & Ungar, M. (2011). A 'day in the lives' of four resilient youths: A study of cultural roots of resilience. *Youth & Society, 43*(3) 799–818.
- Theron, L. C., & Donald, D. R. (2011). Educational psychology and resilience in developing contexts: A rejoinder to Toland and Carrigan (2011). *School Psychology International*, forthcoming. doi: 10.1177/0143034311425579.
- Theron, L. C., & Dunn, N. (2010). Enabling white, Afrikaans-speaking adolescents towards post-divorce resilience: Implications for educators. *South African Journal of Education, 30*, 231-244.
- Theron, L. C., Geyer, S., Strydom, H., & Delport, C. S. L. (2008). The roots of REds: A rationale for the support of educators affected by the HIV and Aids pandemic. *Health SA Gesondheid, 13* (4): 77-88.
- Theron, L. C. & Malindi, M. J. (2010). Resilient street youth: A qualitative South African study. *Journal of Youth Studies, 13* (6):717-736.
- Theron, L. C., & Theron, A. M. C. (2010). A critical review of studies of South African youth resilience, 1990-2008. *South African Journal of Science, 106*(7/8). Retrieved from <http://www.sajs.co.za>
- Theron, L. C., & Theron, A. M. C. (2011). Culturally-embedded meaning-making: An exploration of how young, resilient South African adults confront suffering. Paper accepted for the 2nd International Making Sense of Suffering Conference, Prague, 9-11 November.
- Ungar, M. (2008). Resilience across cultures. *British Journal of Social Work, 38* (2), 218-235.

- Ungar, M. (2010). What is resilience across cultures and contexts? Advances to the theory of positive development among individuals and families under stress. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy, 21*:1–16.
- Ungar, M. (2011). The social ecology of resilience: addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 81*, 1–17.
- Werner, E. E. (1996). Vulnerable but invincible: High risk children from birth to adulthood. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 5* (Suppl 1), 47-51. doi: 10.1007/BF00538544
- Werner, E. E. (2006). What can we learn about resilience from large-scale longitudinal studies? In S. Goldstein & R. B. Brooks (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children* (pp. 91-105). New York, NY: Springer.
- Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1982). *Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1992). *Overcoming the odds. High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wright, M. O., & Masten, A. S. (2006). Resilience processes in development: Fostering positive adaptation in the context of adversity. In S. Goldstein & R. B. Brooks (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children* (pp. 17-37). New York, NY: Springer.

¹ The Pathways to Resilience Study is a funded, five country study of the formal and informal pathways to resilience under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Michael Ungar (Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada). See www.resilienceresearch.org for more information. Linda Theron is a co-principal investigator in this study.

² Retrospective Reflections on Resilience is a funded South African study of the processes of resilience among university students from impoverished backgrounds. See www.opentia.co.za for more information. Linda Theron and Tinie Theron are co-principal investigators in this study.