

ELEMENTS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO RESILIENCE IN YOUNG WOMEN FROM A HIGH-RISK COMMUNITY

**Yasin Nadat, Susanne Jacobs**

This article reports on the elements contributing to the resilience of young women living in a high-risk urban community in the North-West province (NW) of South Africa who cope with various forms of adversity. Young Black Africans in South Africa face a myriad of, particularly in informal settlement communities. High-risk factors include psychosocial threats and structural adversity. A qualitative challenges descriptive approach using semi-structured interviews with 14 participants was utilized. Major findings indicated that religion is a protective factor fostering resilience. Strong altruistic tendencies, for instance, to serve as role models and peer mentors to other at-risk young women in the community were presented as internal assets. Maternal figures provide external social support. Communities and practitioners should monitor and make available opportunities for programmes and peer mentorship initiatives supporting the acquisition of personal and social assets, as well as for attaining goals that promote wellbeing of the young, particularly those who are disadvantaged. There should be more focus on cultural practices in research by social workers. This project contributes to South African research on indigenous studies.

**Keywords:** protective factors, religion, resilience, risk factors, Setswana culture, young women

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## INTRODUCTION

Young Black Africans, in particular young women in South Africa face a myriad of challenges, particularly in informal settlements and township communities. A high-risk community is one in which there is exposure to risks that increase the likelihood of future negative outcomes in a population (Felner & DeVries, 2013:111). High-risk factors include psychosocial threats and structural adversity. It is debatable whether someone from a high-risk community should necessarily be considered vulnerable. However, many young women are exposed to violent crime, gender-based violence (CRIME STATS SA, 2017) and related problems such as rape, prostitution and mental illness. Apparently, the complexities associated with the presence of crime, unemployment and poverty cannot be denied when young African women resort to dangerous means to earn a living, including prostitution. Ikageng in the NW province is representative of a typical township in South Africa, and is therefore considered a significant area of risk because of the psychosocial threats as well as the 'structural' adversity. Young women living in Ikageng live in fear for their safety because of the high crime rates. Although living under harsh circumstances, some young women evince personal resilience, as they manage to survive and cope with the challenges and adversities in mostly positive ways.

There is a gap in knowledge regarding what elements contribute to this kind of resilience: the return to functionality after being exposed to stressors. For this reason the focus of the research that informed this article was on young women living in a typical South African township representative of a significant high-risk area who are exposed to numerous threats. The aim was to develop a better understanding of what the elements are that contribute to the resilience of young women in a high-risk urban community in the North-West province of South Africa.

The article first presents the contextual and the theoretical framework within which the research took place; this is followed by a description of the research methodology that was used. The findings will be explored and compared to the literature on the topic. The article will be concluded with some recommendations for social work services to be rendered to young women exposed to risk areas.

## BACKGROUND

South Africa hosts a population of 55,7 million people, with 44,9 million being Black. About fifty-one percent (28,53 million) are female. Youths, including young women, aged between 15 and 34 account for 36,2% of the population (Community Survey, 2016). Poverty and a high unemployment rate are key challenges in South Africa. Young Black Africans in the country face a myriad of challenges, particularly in structurally inferior areas known as townships and informal settlement communities spread all over South Africa. Poor housing (inadequate shelter), poverty, violence, poor service provision of electricity and sanitation, socio-economic marginalization, resource-poor schools, high rates of communicable diseases (e.g. AIDS, tuberculosis), and unemployment create high-risk communities.

Females are more impoverished than males with a poverty-headcount of 58,6% as compared to 54,9% for males (Statistics South Africa, 2017a). More than four in every ten young South African females were

unemployed in 2018 and have no education or training (NEET) (Statistics SA media release, 2019). Lack of education maintains the impoverished status of young women. Consequently, some young African women are engaging in dangerous activities, such as prostitution, to make a living as they can be more profitable than employment in the formal labour market in South Africa. Women in particular are at risk of becoming victims of crime. According to the Victims of Crime Survey (2016/17: 48) 481 women were victims of sexual assault, more than twice the rate for men (Statistics South Africa, 2017a). From April 2017 to March 2018 182 women were murdered in the North-West province. Young women are eight times more likely to be infected with HIV than their male peers (HSRC, 2012), and one-fifth are HIV positive in their reproductive years (ages 15 to 49 years) (Statistics South Africa Statistical Release P0302, 2018). Women aged 20 to 24 have the highest incidence of risky drinking and are twice as likely to suffer from depression than men (Statistics South Africa, 2017b). In summary, significant and overwhelming socio-economic demands can lead to mental health issues.

South Africa is known for its ethnic and cultural diversity, including Setswana culture. However, as young Black South African youths have become urbanized and Westernized, many cultural practices have declined in use; yet in many rural communities African cultural traditions such as marriage, ancestral worship, chieftainship, traditional healing and witchcraft (Pilane, 2002) are still actively practised (Joyce, 2010:16).

Traditionally, for instance, distinct gender roles demanded that men be in charge of livestock, warfare and hunting, while women worked in the fields and took care of the home and their families. “Mosadi” is a Setswana term for women as the one “who stays”, is trustworthy, dutiful, well-mannered and ideally ensures her home is clean and organized, and her family is comfortable (Nkomozana, 2008:4; Suggs, 1987:111), which acts as role modelling for younger women. With or without education and/or employment, women are providers (Suggs, 1987:113), but they are socially constructed as gender unequal, less able than men, dependent on husbands, brothers and fathers, and thus as playing a less significant role in society (Nkomozana, 2008:1). Due to gender discrimination and lower socioeconomic status, women have fewer options and resources at their disposal to avoid or escape abusive situations and to seek justice (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, (CSV), 2016).

*Resilience*, to give it its most simple explanation, is the positive adaptation of an individual, despite the presence of significant challenges (Masten, 2018:16). Positive adjustment, despite exposure to risk, is necessary for an individual to be considered resilient (Masten, 2011). Significant risks involve the interactions between biological risks (e.g. disability, inherited mental illnesses, premature birth), psychosocial risks (e.g. poverty, community violence, substance abuse), trauma (e.g. war, terrorism, natural disasters) and structural adversity (e.g. disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances over which individuals have limited or no personal control) (Wright, Masten & Narayan, 2013:17), as well as social risk (e.g. family, friends, relationships, community services) (Ungar, 2008:225). Cumulative risks, however, carry a higher likelihood of adverse outcomes (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Hence overcoming challenges is experienced at one or more systemic levels: there is evidence of drawing on emotional, psychological, spiritual and social resources, for instance, positive reinforcement of coping mechanisms by family and community. On an individual level, coping strategies under challenging conditions include the meeting of community cultural expectations of how to behave.

South Africa has seen an increase in resilience research on the ways in which Black South African youths have positively adjusted to adversity, including marginalization, HIV/AIDS, violence, and the structural difficulties in townships and disadvantaged communities (Jefferis & Theron, 2017; Mampane, 2012; Theron, Liebenberg & Malindi, 2014; Theron & Theron, 2014). Mampane (2014), amongst others, has found that resilient adolescents exhibit self-confidence and have excellent social support. With regard to further education, in 2016, 71.9% of the students registered at public higher education institutions were Black, with 114 942 being Black females, showing that number of young Black South African women who are now pursuing higher education is on the increase compared to the number of men (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2018).

But the literature is scant on young women in the 18-25 age group who are living in at-risk areas facing structural adversity and who are exposed to violent crime, gender-based violence (CRIME STATS SA, 2017), and related problems such as rape, prostitution and mental illness. Although young women live under harsh circumstances and are daily in fear for their safety and suffering psychosocial threats, some of them overcome multiple challenges and this evinces resilience, managing to survive and cope with challenges and overcome adversities.

The above outline informed the choice of a suitable theoretical framework, as described next.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In support of a theory on resilience, the Protective Factor Model (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) postulates that promotive assets modify the relationship between a risk and other promotive factors (assets, or intrapersonal qualities, and resources, or external characteristics) and outcomes. The interaction and integration of assets and resources are necessary to exhibit resilience despite facing significant risks (Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Caldwell, Aiyer & Miller, 2013:216). For example, assets may be healthy coping skills, efficacy, a clear sense of identity, and orientation towards the future, whereas resources may be excellent parental support, adult mentors and opportunity structures (Zimmerman et al., 2013). The term ‘resources’ highlights the role of the social environment in fostering resilience, positioning the theory in a more ecological framework. Resilience is a result of environmental, social and individual factors (promotive factors) interacting to reduce the likelihood of a negative outcome when faced with adversity (Zimmerman et al., 2013:215).

An awareness that resilience might be informed by similar resources across contexts but may reflect cultural and contextual differences is on the increase globally (Panter-Brick, 2015:237; Ungar, Ghazinour & Richter, 2013:361). Common resilience processes exist, but are not universal. Little attention has been paid to the resilience of specific groups of youths in majority-world environments, as well as how such resilience is influenced by culture and context (Panter-Brick, 2015; Ungar, Ghazinour & Richter, 2013). Highly regarded resilience scholars maintain that the role of culture in resilience needs to be investigated (Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012; Theron & Liebenberg, 2015; Ungar, 2008, 2011, 2012; Ungar, Ghazinour & Richter, 2013; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). “Cultural practice” has been identified by social work academics as a priority area for the “decolonization of social work” (ASASWEI, 2017; Van Breda, 2018:12).

In summary, essential to resilience is the presence of both risk and promotive factors, which leads to a positive outcome or the reduction or avoidance of a negative outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005:399). Building resilience when facing chronic challenges differs from preventing problems and suppressing dysfunction; resilience rather involves capacity building, even anticipating new encounters (Ungar, 2018). Resilience is not a latent quality, but involves multiple systems processes working together and occurring when environmental, social and individual factors interrupt the trajectory from risk to pathology (Zimmerman et al., 2013:215). Integrating cultural world views can create a shared understanding of resilience exhibited by African youths (Theron, 2017) in support of their professional development.

Against this background discussion and outline of the chosen theoretical framework, the research methodology will be described below.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research problem**

The research problem identified the need to explore the elements that contribute to the resilience of young women, living in a high-risk urban community. In exploring these contributing elements, resilience can be enhanced, reducing the risk that more women become victims of the adverse conditions prevailing in high-risk communities.

Besides aiming to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on resilience in the social work profession, knowing what elements contribute to resilience is integral to developing effective service provision and policies on youth interventions by practitioners working in communities, as there are limited initiatives for youths and young women. In order to draw on opportunities for the acquisition of personal and social assets and attaining goals that promote wellbeing for young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, research on resilience can be advantageous.

The research question emanating from the identified problem was: What are the elements that contribute to the resilience of young Setswana women in a high-risk urban community?

### **Research approach and design**

A qualitative descriptive approach was adopted for this study as an in-depth description offers authentic responses to questions about how people feel about a specific phenomenon, with the emphasis on the quality of information obtained rather than the quantity and size of the sample (Colorafi & Evans, 2016:17); this study investigated elements of resilience as experienced by the participants.

The aim was to explore the elements that contribute to the resilience of young women from a high-risk urban community in the North-West province (NW) of South Africa.

### **Research context**

The target population for this study was young women from the NW, the specific context Ikageng, a township bordering the city of Potchefstroom, made up of dwellings in formal and informal settlements, representing a typical township in South Africa. Ikageng has a population of 87 701 with 45 144 women and 42 557 men; 51,27% are female (Statistics SA Census 2011). Ikageng has 26 245 households, of which 39.1% are female-headed, and 71.2% live in formal dwellings. Only 37.6% of the formal dwellings have piped water inside the house (Statistics South Africa Census, 2011). According to the Statistics SA Community Survey (2016), 98.04% of the Ikageng population is African, and 58.53% is Setswana speaking. According to SA Police Crime Statistics SA (SAPS, 2019), in 2018 Ikageng had the fifth highest number of crimes (8 629) in the NW province. Murder accounted for 24 of these crimes while sexual offences stood at 161.

### **Sample and population**

The sample population are alumni from a youth development organisation (YDO) in Ikageng, who volunteer to teach learners on Saturday mornings. Duties of the alumni volunteers are relevant to the context; they offer career guidance, accompany learners on field trips and open university days, assist with life-skill programmes covering topics such as communication skills, self-knowledge and self-esteem, gender-based violence, substance abuse, how to draw up a CV, and provide support with computer literacy.

Over 50% of the alumni volunteers “pay-it-forward” once they have matriculated, thus giving back to the programmes that assisted them. Also, 53% of alumni have accessed tertiary education.

The sample, 14 young women, was sourced through non-probability purposeful sampling. The sample was relatively small but able to supply rich information. The criteria for inclusion in the study were young Setswana women aged between 18 and 25, residing in Ikageng, doing volunteer work for at least a year, English speaking, and not indulging in risky behaviours.

Thirteen participants were enrolled in tertiary education, one had completed a 4-year Bachelor's degree. Eight participants lived in houses, two in informal dwellings, and four resided in flats. One participant was a full-time employee and one worked part-time. Twelve participants were single, one was engaged, and one participant had a male partner.

The Branch Coordinator (mediator) of the youth development organisation (YDO), who has been familiar with the young women on a weekly basis in a professional and personal capacity, identified and recruited young women who best represented the notion of resilience while living in the township under exposure

to risk. The main principles governing the description of resilience pertain to psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that assist in maintaining wellbeing (Ungar, 2008:225), as well as belonging to a specific cultural group (Ungar, 2008). Alumni volunteers of the YDO are not only surviving, but are also altruistic and giving back to the community. Informational brochures for recruitment investigated possible elements of resilience through points such as: "I have people I look up to"; "My family stands up for me in difficult times"; I have opportunities to show others that I can act responsibly"; "I think it is important to serve the community"

## **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection using semi-structured interviews was undertaken over four days with 14 participants (each one lasting 45 minutes to one hour) until data saturation was reached. Questions, grouped according to the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28) (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011) were focused on young women living in a specific township.

Interview questions were based on grouped themes of the CYRM-28, and are in line with criteria the community lives up by and can thus be linked to the sample: exposure to adversity/risks/challenges, adversity experienced at one or more systemic levels, and evidence of the use of emotional, psychological, spiritual and social resources. Questions included: "Tell me more about yourself"; "Tell me more about the risks that face young women in your community"; "In what way do you feel that the risks affect you?"; "How have you overcome challenges that you faced?"; "What do you consider yourself to be good at, and how has it contributed to how you deal with your difficulties?"; "What were your sources of support when dealing with your challenges?" Follow-up and probing questions were used to elicit more detailed information.

After the content analysis, data were interpreted according to Fergus and Zimmerman's Protective Factor Model of Resilience; the steps included familiarisation with the data and reading through transcripts, dividing and condensing the text into meaningful units, formulation of codes and developing categories and themes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Subthemes and themes were compared and refined.

## **Ethical considerations**

To safeguard participants, ethical considerations as set by the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee within the Faculty of Health Sciences (NWU-00030-18-S1) were followed. Once volunteers confirmed their voluntary participation to a trained mediator, interviews were conducted at a convenient venue and commenced once the informed consent forms were signed. Research should not be to the detriment of participants (Klocker, 2015); researchers have an ethical obligation to minimize foreseeable risks such as physical, emotional or informational risks, including pain, discomfort, embarrassment, emotional distress or breach of confidentiality. The participants' welfare was ensured by venue privacy, confidentiality measures and referral for further counselling, if necessary.

## **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure *trustworthiness*, criteria as suggested by Polit and Beck (2014:394) were employed to ensure quality, confidence in data, interpretation and methods. Strategies included a comprehensive audit trail, thorough documentation and reflexive journaling of research processes and thick description of data. 'On the spot' feedback, immediately after the interview ensured accurate understanding of responses pertaining to experiences relating to the topic.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The context of the study was limited; therefore the discussion of the findings below should be viewed in terms of participants representing a specific geographical area, which does not represent all young women who are exposed to at-risk situations in South Africa. As a sample of only 14 participants was used, so the findings cannot be generalized to Setswana women in the 18-25 year age group living in other townships in South Africa. In addition, only volunteers from a specific youth development organisation were interviewed. The subjective selection of participants by the mediator may have resulted

in a biased sample. Another limitation is that this study only provided an understanding of the participants' resilience at a singular point in time. Although the participants understood and spoke English well, Setswana is their first language, and there might have been factors that could have been better described in their mother tongue.

## FINDINGS

For the purpose of this article, four themes will be presented: religion and relationship with God; altruism and role models; social support through maternal figures; and the connection between inner strength and future goals.

### Theme 1: Religion and relationship with God

All 14 participants claimed to belong to the Christian faith. According to Bardi and Guerra (2011:910) and Fischer, Ai, Ayden, Frey and Haslam, (2010) in dealing with stressors resorting to religion is more customary in non-Western cultural groups. Participants reported the importance of religion and its fostering of resilience, and also referred to external religious coping mechanisms. Religion in this context entailed the integration of internal assets with positive external sources, and can thus be specified as a protective and supportive factor.

*It is my religion that helps me a lot, it gives hope, a sense of security, encouragement, and motivation ... I usually read the Word of God, the Bible or sing when I'm down and ultimately find peace. (P12)*

*I have this really close relationship with God. So that just gives me strength to carry on another day. And uh gives me hope. You know that I can make it regardless of the circumstances I grew up in. (P5)*

*Whenever I have challenges, I always remind myself that God will never leave nor forsake me. So whatever happens for a reason. (P14)*

*So when you have problems, you talk to God and everything whatever whenever you need something you not feeling ok. (P11)*

*So when I come across such things I say, God, please remove me out of this situation. I cast this all unto You. May you do something? And then He definitely comes through for me. (P6)*

Findings correlate with the literature on the critical role that religion plays in resilience (Manning & Miles, 2018). Religious involvement is associated with increased hope and positivity. Also, prayer is the most frequently used spiritual coping method and a "resilience enabler" (Malindi & Theron, 2010:323) for youths in Southern Africa. Prayer and reading religious texts such as the Bible are a means of comfort and inner calm (Jones, Dorsett, Simpson & Briggs, 2018:525). Coping methods of active religious surrender to gain control, undertake reappraisal and seek spiritual support from others are advantageous means of reframing stressors (Pargament, Feuille, & Burdzy, 2011:56) and examples of the integration of internal as well as external positive resources.

### Theme 2: Altruism and role models

The majority of participants desired and dreamt about helping others by becoming better role models and empowering others. Most participants bemoaned the lack of women, also younger women, as positive role models in the Ikageng community. Role models could encourage altruism by modelling resilience-promoting behaviours to empower others. Contact with resilient role models offers encouragement and an indication of how to cope positively with challenging conditions (Williams, Bryan, Morrison & Scott, 2017:192).

*And we have a student of which I felt like she's going through what I went through. But she's going through it worse way than me. And I'm just trying all my best to help her, I don't want her to be dealing with things I dealt with. (P7)*

*I'm trying to make a group of youth members to try to do things for the community instead of focusing on things that don't really matter. (P1.)*

*Because I feel like a lot of young girls have lost their worth. So with the society, I'm living in having to see young girls treating and handling themselves in a negative way, not in a dignified way. I just want to encourage and tell them they can do it as young women. (P6)*

Young, resilient women have the urge to share experiences (positive intrapersonal factors) and hope for external (positive) resources as they dream about uplifting the community. Altruism can be regarded as an asset (a positive internal factor) and may be a redirection of one's concentration away from oneself towards others, because of higher self-esteem and a better sense of the meaning of one's life purpose (Southwick, Lowthert & Gruber, 2016:138). Altruism is positively correlated with resilience in children and adults (Leontopoulou, 2010). Altruism as a protective resource is anchored in the community, as opportunities for others to excel is resilience-promoting for both parties. Interpersonal protective resources embedded in the community, along with intrapersonal strengths are reported to cultivate resilience. Theron and Theron (2016) stated that universal ways of living, being interdependent, and emotionally taking care of others are evident in resilient women, a finding confirmed in a study by Jefferis and Theron (2017). Resilience processes included emotional and pragmatical constructive relational contexts in which girls received and reciprocated support.

### **Theme 3: Social support through maternal figures**

The majority of young women (9 participants) from townships reside with maternal figures and female kin, mostly with fathers being absent. They attribute resilience to maternal figures, an asset regarded as a major source of social support, even in the presence of both parents. However, young women are expected to care for younger siblings in the case of parental loss, absence, irresponsibility and illness, and thus provide social, emotional support to siblings. Also influential are non-familial female adults such as supportive teachers and peers.

*My mother is the biggest support, constantly reminds me of my strength, and never discourage me when I fail. (P14)*

*To me, my (girl) friends, they're my family. Because of ...I feel without them, back in high school, I wasn't able to survive. (P7)*

*Because I have a sister I can talk to. And she's been through those things and she understands. So you can talk to someone and they would understand. (P2)*

*I feel like, uhmm I had to focus more on myself and the things that I want to achieve in life and yes I got the motivation, mostly, by my grandmother. (P1)*

*There is ...I could say a family friend or something like that...yes, she takes care of us, and also our siblings, when I ...and I need to talk, I go to her, yes. She is not a relative, but just a close family friend. (P13)*

As also evident in the literature, social support provided from significant others such as female relatives (Theron, 2017:11) is instrumental in developing resilience (Shepherd, Reynolds & Moran, 2010:282). Theron and Theron (2010) state that protective resources are embedded in families. Supportive family relationships provide a buffer against violence, enable girls to cope resiliently with molestation, encourage Black youths to complete tertiary studies, and enable individuals to adapt in contexts of HIV and AIDS. Supportive family relations include participation in activities, experiences of belonging, being loved and regarded as valuable within the family system. Similarly, supportive relationships with non-familial adults, such as teachers (Jefferis & Theron, 2017; Theron & van Rensburg, 2018) and peers are important. A positive school environment is valuable in protecting youths at risk of adverse outcomes, especially those living in single-parent homes (Zimmerman et al., 2013:217).

#### **Theme 4: Connection between inner strength and future goals**

Resilient young Setswana women frequently articulate specific goals and positive future aspirations for a better life, such as pursuing further education, providing for the family, being happy, moving out of detrimental circumstances such as informal settlements, and aspiring to a better life.

*You must be the one who's gonna sit yourself down and tell yourself: what do YOU want? Do you want to be a loser at the end of the day? Smoking, drinking, doing nothing? Or do you want to be someone at the end of the day? (P2)*

*If it's not in you, then no matter how people try to motivate, it doesn't work...it has to start with you. (P1)*

*Ye, I have to stay strong. There's a lot of people.... I want to put a smile on their faces. Just giving up now won't help. It's gonna cause pain to a lot of people. (P12)*

*I want to see myself as a woman who have achieved a lot of things. And I also feel like I can be a...sort of like an idol and an inspiration to young girls. What they...young girls are going through, what I've been through. I feel like I can also be a motivational speaker to help them get through what I went through you know. (P13)*

*I shouldn't give up in life, and that not everything stays the same as it is, some things change. All you just need to do is like be positive. (P5)*

Attaining goals requires a strategy and taking on responsibility, achievable through personal perseverance and inner assets (internal locus of control). Being autonomous and “believing in oneself” will generate contentment.

*I don't plan on being an employee forever. Uhmm, I have this 5-year goal plan. After that, I will be independent. (P5)*

*... to see my mum and siblings in a better place , a good place where she's ok physically and emotionally, in their own home. And in order for me to do that, I need to be successful first. (P11)*

*My motivation was I want to get out of Ikageng like that's not the life I want for myself. I've seen like teenage pregnancies, people who are comfortable about where they are. So for me personally, I don't want to live this life. I wanna do better for myself. (P10)*

*But I kept on pushing myself. Like I want to have an adventurous life. My future is looking bright cause I take each day as it comes, so no matter what I'm going to achieve and reach my goals. (P4)*

*People think having a job or having a salary, or having money with you, its easy life. But you have to bear in mind that life would pass on, and what if you no more have a salary, what then would you do? At least if you'd say I have a qualification that will help me get something better. (P7)*

*What I actually want... in life, is to be able to take care of my siblings, to be financially stable. They mustn't go through what I went through. So I must make sure that I finish my degree and then probably work. I want to change my life completely. (P13)*

Intrapersonal strengths, such as positive self-efficacy, where one optimistically believes in one's abilities, is linked to stronger motivation, determination, and perseverance (Bandura, 1997) and resilience (Martin & Marsh, 2006). An internal locus of control encourages participants to strive and excel (Mampane, 2014:6). A positive mind-set contributes to resilience, concurring with the International Resilience Project Report (2006:5).

Prospective goal attainment relating to control and planning indicates a significant connection to resilience (Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin & Royer, 2009:24; Mampane & Bouwer, 2011:114). Daily

decisions regarding peers, how to behave and what activities to engage in implies less involvement in risky behaviours. Similarly, in a study by Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthon and Jenson, (2015:155), adolescents and young adults expressed a desire to be happy, stop struggling, and improve their lives and those of others based upon their own life experiences. According to Chapin (2015:1796), being happy is a life goal of resilient youths. The value assigned to education may be a result of the importance attached to education in African communities (Biko, 1979).

## **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

Positive adaptation in the presence of exposure to risk (Masten, 2018:16) is necessary for an individual to be considered resilient. The findings of this study indicated that religion, social support, altruism and future goal attainment can be described as defining elements contributing to the resilience of young Setswana women living in a high-risk urban environment.

Young women (late adolescence, broadly between the ages of 15 and 25) moving into adulthood have to make conscious decisions about their future that can either advance their lives or create dependency. During this phase challenging life experiences may elicit strong emotions and uncertainty. However, the capacity for analytical thinking and reflection marked during late adolescence is favourable to further education and to shaping the immediate environment. The shaping of intrinsic assets is also promotive of utilising extrinsic resources (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Religion is the most influential protective factor of resilience, which was unsurprising, as a significant proportion (79,9%) of Black South Africans are Christian. Similarly, findings from South African research show that religion plays a vital role in the formation of resilience (Ebersöhn & Bouwer, 2013; Mohangi, Ebersöhn & Elof, 2011; Van Breda, 2017). Religion is the integration of internal assets (prayer, reading Bible texts, experiencing hope and positivity) with positive external sources (socialising with other Christian youth), and hence a protective and a supportive factor.

The desire to empower other youths by being better as role models and mentors through the sharing of one's own experiences in similar circumstances is indicative of positive intrapersonal assets such as greater self-esteem. To be altruistic means that one is contributing to external resources. In other words, interpersonal protective sources as well as intrapersonal strengths cultivate resilience interdependently. Role modelling will assist young women to cultivate resilience and therefore avoid possible negative outcomes. Being altruistic contributes towards maintaining a balance between individual and collective needs. Resilient young women can promote prosocial activities, serve as peer role models, model positive behaviours, and support skills acquisition and talent development (Zimmerman et al., 2013:217).

Promotive assets and resources can be integrated through involvement in structured prosocial peer mentorship activities. Participation requires both individual initiative as well as external opportunities (contextual attributes) to promote healthy development in the face of risk.

Paternal absence, as in the case of most of the participants, is a current reality in South Africa (Patel & Mavhungu, 2016; Theron, 2016). Social support (an external promotive resource) entails empowering relationships with maternal figures, according to Theron (2017:11) as women tend to encourage positive adjustment despite exposure to adversity. Moreover, positive teacher-student relationships can potentially make a significant contribution to the resilience of high-risk adolescents living in marginalized communities. Moreover, many young women are expected to care for younger siblings, and the literature indicates that the added responsibilities lead to maturity and resilience (Mampane, 2014; Mohangi, Ebersöhn & Elof, 2011:401).

Future goals, which featured strongly, serve as an asset to young women, who envisage education as a means to a better life, which is a finding consistent with other South African studies (Theron, 2016). As a result of the apartheid era, which disadvantaged Black South Africans, a high value is placed on education in Black communities (Biko, 1979; Phasha, 2010). Young women place an emphasis on education, possibly because the valorization of education is higher for Black South African women who

have faced adversity because of their race and gender (Phasha, 2010:1249). Intrapersonal strengths such as prospective goal attainment relating to control and planning indicate a significant connection to resilience and are promotive of resilience.

Resilience includes the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing (Ungar, 2008; Ungar, 2011). Protective factors refer to elements that decrease the chances of negative outcomes occurring, whereas risk factors increase the chances of negative outcomes; thus, these are not two divergent categories, but rather overlap (Masten, 2018). Protective processes are the filter between risk and outcomes (Ungar, 2018, 2019).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The issue raised was discovering what elements contribute to resilience faced by young women living in townships with cumulative risks. The participants chosen, although from a high-risk community facing life-changing and stressful adverse conditions, adapted well to their environment. The fact that participants excelled is indicative of the interrelation of resources such as religion and social support; and assets such as altruism and future aspirations, both cultivating resilience and modulating cumulative risk. Overall, the findings support the paramount role of adults in helping youths to overcome adversity. This indigenous South African study responds to the recent call for South African researchers regarding the contextualization of research. The theme was worth exploring as it is important to build on indigenous understanding in order to render appropriate services.

The protective factor model of resilience contends that assets and resources diminish the likelihood of a negative outcome in the presence of risks, leading to healthy development. Findings indicate that elements pertain to resources (religion and social support) and assets (altruism and future aspirations) and cultivate resilience and modulate cumulative risk for young women who are faced with challenges that are predominant in South African township environments.

Suggestions for further research that could supplement the limited knowledge regarding the resilience of young African women in general include conducting studies with a larger sample, involving women who are not part of the youth development organisation, and exploring the experiences of men and women from other cultures and at-risk locations throughout South Africa. Studies conducted in traditional African languages may yield more in-depth and rich information, instead of in English, a second language. A cumulative approach that takes into account longitudinal effects across ecological domains (Zimmerman et al., 2013) will further contribute to understanding of resilience to inform more tailored interventions for youths.

To aid practice, service practitioners should keep in mind that since religion, involving the integration of internal assets such as prayer and reading Bible texts (which lead to experiences of hope and positivity), is the most critical contributor and protective factor to resilience, youths should socialize with a diverse range of Christian and other religious and cultural groups (part of positive external sources), for instance, by opening up religious organisations.

Since young women articulate the desire to assist, empower and role model other at-risk young women in their community, social service providers, community members and practitioners should provide opportunities for programmes and peer mentorship initiatives to back up young women, especially since social support is mainly exhibited by maternal figures, who raise families, and female next of kin (grandmothers), teachers and peers. Women's constructive contributions should be sustained, implying a need for research studies that investigate what these women would consider helpful (Theron, 2016).

Interventions intended to promote resilience, focusing on strengths-based methods that focus on both assets and resources, should be considered to enhance the wellbeing of youths. Intrapersonal strengths such as attaining prospective goals relating to control and planning promote the formation of resilience. Ungar's (2018, 2019) guide "What Works" for designing programmes that build resilience, focusing more on increasing capacity rather than decreasing disorder, may be appropriate for such interventions. "What Works", for instance, includes essential experiences such as building relationships, encouraging

powerful identities, providing opportunities for power and control, promoting social justice, improving access to basic material needs, developing a sense of belonging, responsibility, spirituality and life purpose, and encouraging a sense of cultural roots. Printable for readers globally, the manual is designed as an open-access interactive electronic document with links to supporting audio and video content. According to Theron and Theron (2010), to truly champion resilience, professionals focusing on the youth need to better understand how context and culture influence resilience, promoting connections among South African youths by partnering with community representatives in order to understand the local elements and indigenous culture of resilience. The acquisition of personal as well as social assets that enhance the wellbeing of the diverse range of youths who are disadvantaged should be promoted.

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