



Pathways of resilience for children facing socio-economic adversities: Experiences from Future Families' OVC programmes in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Some children display extraordinary strengths in the face of adversity unlike others in similar circumstances. Instead of succumbing to the negative effects of socio-economic adversities, they manage to cope, establishing positive developmental trajectories, which are critical for the achievement of successful outcomes. This qualitative, phenomenological study explores experiences of resilience among OVC benefiting from programmes implemented by Future Families (a non-profit organisation) in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. Five children were purposefully selected, one from each programme site, on the basis of demonstrated ability in confronting adverse situations while maintaining positive adaptation and effective functioning as individuals, at home, school and in the community. Data were collected from stories on pictures drawn and in-depth interviews which were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings show that the socio-economic adversities that participants face affect their social-emotional well-being. However, through personal agency, supportive relationships and programmes implemented by Future Families, OVC develop pathways of resilience which help them to produce better-than-expected outcomes. The study recommends the strengthening of NPOs working with children and families in communities experiencing socio-economic adversities, as well as increased participation of children in resilience-building studies, policy and practice.

1. Introduction

Globally, children face multiple risks that are detrimental to their survival, development, protection and participation in family and social life. These risks result in physical and psychological impoverishment, thus eroding individual coping capabilities and choices (Human Development Report, 2014). While the risk factors in South Africa are similar to those identified in most parts of the world, the emphasis vary across countries (Maree, 2015). In the South African context, the National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC) in South Africa is aligned with government priorities to address social and economic risk factors affecting the positive development of children. To that effect, children are protected by a progressive rights' framework enshrined in the South African Constitution and the various ratified international instruments embedded in the NAPC in South Africa (2012). The NAPC is explicit that children need an enabling environment for protection and development, but also that they should fully participate in matters that concern them and also take responsibility to seize opportunities for their optimal functioning. However, Theron (2016) laments that children and youth's voices on resilience are often side-lined, yet their perspectives are critical considering that they form the largest segment

of the world's population. Therefore, this paper seeks to understand the experiences of Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) who participate in the programmes of Future Families, a non-profit organisation (NPO), by establishing their pathways of resilience while facing socio-economic adversities.

The lack of adequate material resources makes children to experience feelings of social isolation, discrimination at school and in the community, thus affecting their self-esteem and relationships (Cluver & Gardner, 2007). In addition, social factors driven by the evolving family and community structures have a negative effect on children, causing feelings of helplessness and hopelessness (Pillay, 2011). As confirmed by a study in Nigeria, children facing socio-economic adversities experience emotional distress (Adejuwon & Oki, 2011). The emotional jeopardy created by such adversities resulted in negative outcomes as witnessed by the "surging street children populations, child prostitutions, vulnerability to crime, a growing population of uneducated and unskilled labourers, teenage pregnancy, abortion, infection with HIV and STD" (Adejowun & Oki, 2011, p. 18). Consequently, interventions that strengthen personal agency among children should be strengthened, otherwise the gains made on other critical aspects of human development will be undermined (Human Development Report, 2014).

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Although it is important that children exercise personal agency, Ungar (2012a) emphasises that resilience is influenced by clusters of individual, relational and broader social factors. Therefore, in understanding children's resilience, the broader social and physical ecology or context in which they experience their adversity must first be explored. So, studies of children facing risks due to socio-economic circumstances and their explanations to resilience enablers are imperative both for resilience knowledge, policy and practice (Theron, 2017).

In this paper, OVC are regarded as vulnerable because they are trapped in poverty and associated problems of poor education, healthcare, social exclusion, environmental risks, violence and abuse which restrict their 'aspirations and hopefulness' to 'create[ing] a more prosperous future' (SAHR & UNICEF, 2014, p.9). These risks are disruptive to their developmental trajectories and increase the vulnerability of OVC to poor life outcomes (Theron & Theron, 2014). However, as argued by Van Breda (2018), the relationship between vulnerability and negative outcomes is not universal. While some OVC crumble in the face of adversity, others find pathways of resilience that help them to survive and even thrive under similar situations. So, in the South African context, understanding the resilience phenomenon helps in exploring the vulnerabilities as well as protective factors that contribute to positive adaptation and effective functioning of children. Hence, this paper seeks to explore how OVC in poor urban communities of South Africa negotiate the complexities between risk and positive outcomes as individuals, in families, schools and communities. As asserted by Van Breda (2018), "the resilience theory helps to open up new understandings of how people in the resource-constrained environment of South Africa work for their growth and development, and how social structures of inequality and opportunity can be mobilised to cultivate a society that cherishes social flourishing" (p.13)."

Firstly, the paper gives an overview of OVC's vulnerabilities as a result of poverty, HIV/AIDS, and migration and Future Families' programmes in mitigating these risk factors. Next follows a discussion on the resilience theory, then the methodology detailing data collection and analysis of past and present experiences of resilience. The findings are then presented and discussed, followed by the implications and limitations of the study. The paper concludes by recommending increased research on resilience among children, policies and programmes that engage children as key actors in social development.

2. OVC risk factors and Future Families' programmes

Many South African researchers have identified risk factors affecting the positive development of children (Maree, 2015). These include family or home risk factors which are driven by poverty, physical and sexual abuse, loveless parents, poor parenting, alcohol and drug abuse and family conflicts while community risks factors as those fuelled by poverty, unemployment, higher crime rates, violence, HIV/AIDS and other social conflicts (Maree, 2015). According to Maree (2015), education risk factors result from problems at school especially bullying, poor academic performance, inconsistent discipline and lack of parental involvement. Maree (2015) also recognises extrafamilial relationship risk factors which are caused by associating with deviant peers, peer pressure and gang membership. Lastly, Maree (2015) identifies individual risk factors as those arising from feelings of hopelessness and alienation, early aggression behaviour, personality and mental disorders. Considering the above, there is need for interventions that strengthen the individual and environmental protective factors to cushion children from the effects of risks (Gauvin-Lepage, Lefebvre, & Malo, 2014).

Families are the first line of protection from developmental risks. According to Martin, Hall, and Lake (2018), families provide "the best start in life and harbour significant opportunities for children's development" (p.116). However, some families are under stress and therefore fail to provide adequate care and support to their children (Martin et al., 2018). Such families must be enabled to play this development

role by receiving services, either from the government or civil society, although government is the duty bearer to ensure families in adversity benefit (Martin et al., 2018). Non-profit organisations (NPOs) such as Future Families are important partners in providing services that strengthen the capacity of children and families to cope with various adversities. Future Families provides care and support services and programmes to families in adversity ensure that children in need have a safe, nurturing environment to grow into independent, empowered adults capable of their own future (<http://futurefamilies.co.za/wp/>). Future Families assists and empower families who are under stress or suffering deprivation so that they can support and provide for children in their care (Martin et al., 2018).

Where poverty intersects with other risk factors such as HIV, AIDS and migration, children's adversities are increased, especially if they have been marginalized over a long time (Martin et al., 2018). While in recent years, there is a notable decrease in the rates of AIDS-related deaths due to increased interventions for prevention and treatment, its effects are still being felt in Sub-Saharan Africa (Lombe, Mabikke, Enelamah, and Chu (2017)). As reported by Hall and Sambu (2018), in 2017, 14% of all children in South Africa were orphaned, a total of 2.8 million. Thus, in South Africa, OVC continue to experience vulnerabilities associated to HIV and AIDS. As noted by Chitiyo, Changara, and Chitiyo (2008), OVC who are either infected by HIV or not experience emotional anguish. According to Chitiyo and others (2008), the psychological distress experienced by OVC is intensified by a "concoction of challenges like anxiety, grief, trauma, depression stigma and discrimination" (p.386). To mitigate the risks associated with HIV/AIDS, Future Families implements holistic programmes for the prevention of HIV and teenage pregnancy (Report, 2015). Psychological support services to OVC include grief and stress management and other psychosocial activities that enhance coping mechanisms. Child protection services against sexual abuse, domestic violence and child trafficking are provided by means of training families and caregivers on children's rights and identifying problematic situations (<http://futurefamilies.co.za/wp/>).

South Africa remains a major destination for asylum-seekers and immigrants seeking for better social and economic opportunities (United Nations Commission for Refugees. (2015), 2015). However, the envisaged prospects may not be easily attainable due to unfavourable migration policies, wearisome migration processes and the negative attitudes of receiving communities (Webber, 2007). These impediments result in social, economic and psychological distress among families. While children of migrants excel in so many respects, Bryant (2005) argues that the migration of parents causes psychological stress to children. The separation of parents or marriage break-downs as a result of migration brings feelings of sadness and loneliness to children (Bryant, 2005). In response to the diverse needs of refugees and asylum seekers and their children, Future Families implements a social assistance programme that ensures physical and psychological well-being (Annual Report, 2014). Future Families employ refugees to assist in providing language classes to new immigrants, thereby facilitating social integration and access to other services. The NPO provides support in migration processes as well as facilitates access to other specialist services as needed (Annual Report, 2014). Children of refugees and asylum seekers receive educational support as well as psychosocial programmes in schools (Annual Report, 2014).

In 2017, the poverty rate for South Africa was very high, with 65% of children reported to be living below the upper-bound poverty line (Hall & Sambu, 2018). According to Hall and Sambu (2018), the highest proportion of children living in poverty in South Africa come from households with unemployed adults. The legacy of apartheid policies which steadily weakened the family, is at the core of many families' adversities in South Africa (Martin et al., 2018). These stressors are exacerbated by persistent and structural unemployment, spatial inequality and poverty (Martin et al., 2018). Caregivers rely on social assistance grants as a source of income to meet children's basic needs.

By the end of March 2018, 12.3 million children were receiving the Child Support Grant (Budlender, 2018), which is an indicator of how many children in South Africa live in resource-restricted households (; Hall & Sambu, 2018). In their study on South African child and youth resilience studies from 2009 to 2017, Van Breda and Theron (2018) observed that the most prominent factor included in a wide range of adverse contexts that place young people at risk, was structural disadvantage. This includes poverty and staying in rural or township communities that usually have limited resources for social, health and educational services. In addition to structural disadvantage, other adversities include, among other, HIV, orphanhood, child-headed households and violence. This is the profile of the OVC that Future Families target in their programmes.

Children experiencing extreme poverty lack access to adequate food, shelter, health services, education, water and sanitation (NPAC in South Africa, 2012). These deprivations make them more vulnerable and trigger emotional stress. Several studies conducted in South Africa identified the link between poverty and feelings of sadness, anger and hopelessness among children (Pillay, 2011). Through Future Families' social assistance programme, families experiencing poverty have access to food, education and health services (Report, 2015). Also, Future Families Enterprises Close Corporation employs social enterprise strategies for its own financial sustainability and of families within the programme (Report, 2014). Seboko (meaning earthworm) is now a fully registered organic compost product with the Department of Agriculture and sold commercially in a number of nurseries across Tshwane. Hydroponic tunnels have been built and produce tomatoes at a rapid rate. The Ford Resource and Engagement (Frec) Centre, creates access to new opportunities for skills development, job assistance and entrepreneur development in early childhood development training, financial literacy, employability, entrepreneurship and mentorship (<http://futurefamilies.co.za/wp/>). Future Families has also adopted capacity building and job creation approach internally by creating an upward career trajectory for staff, starting with opportunities for OVC to become child and youth care workers and in turn, team leaders. The next level enters the professional category where team leaders can study to become social auxiliary workers and thereafter embark on studying social work.

The multilevel processes and programmes that Future Families implement in mitigating interrelated risks associated with poverty, HIV and AIDS and migration, supports a social ecological approach to resilience, which "view the resilience of individuals as emanating from a range of systems in the individual's social environment" (Van Breda & Theron, 2018:137).

3. Resilience theory

Resilience theory has evolved over time and across disciplines. Due to this evolution, there is no consensus on the definition, as the theory has been defined to suit various contexts or fields of interest (Gauvin-Lepage et al., 2014). As such, this study used the social ecological approach to resilience, which is well-suited to the African context (Theron, 2019). According to Theron (2019), children in Africa are socialised with the traditional values of interdependence and reciprocity, known as *Ubuntu* in South Africa. Against this background, Van Rensburg, Theron, and Rothman (2014), view resilience or positive adjustment to hardship as a complex transactional process between individuals and their social ecology in which an individual tactically negotiates access to well-being promoting resources and the social ecology in turn provides support in culturally-defined ways. The interpretation of resilience as a process evolved from a person-focused model in the 1970 s, to variable-focused models in the 1980 s and then to pathway models from the 1990 s onwards (Van Rensburg et al., 2014). The pathway model focuses on resilience processes across contexts and cultures (Van Rensburg et al., 2014). Therefore, from a social ecology perspective, resilience is a process that results in positive

outcomes for young people who are vulnerable and is facilitated by the individual and the social system comprising the family, school and community (Theron, 2017).

The five indicators of resilience for young people as individuals are motivational and cognitive competences, behavioural and social skills, emotional stability as well as physical well-being (Theron, 2017). As argued by Fox, Leech and Roberts (2014), the state of being resilient does not mean the non-existence of trauma or distress; neither does it imply the absence of feelings of emotional pain or sadness. Rather, resilience is a process of adapting to adversities, learning from experiences and developing coping strategies for the future. So, resilience-building requires the adoption of new behaviours, thoughts and attitudes which enable one to withstand and bounce back from adversity (Fox, Leech, & Roberts, 2014).

4. Methodology

This study used qualitative methods to explore the features of the resilience phenomenon among children in the context of South Africa. It sought to understand and interpret the meaning of their socio-economic situations from their perspectives (Spratt, Walker, & Robinson, 2004). In a phenomenological study, the objective is to elicit the participant's story, ensuring that the words of both the participant and researcher are understood and spoken as intended (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007).

4.1. Participants

To provide detailed accounts of experiences, it is sufficient to select a few individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The purposive sampling method was used to recruit five participants between 13 and 18 years of age who were participating in Future Families OVC programmes and who could draw and share their stories. One child from each of the five programme sites in Gauteng Province, South Africa were selected. Key informants (child and youth care workers, social workers and programme managers) from Future Families assisted in selecting five children who demonstrated positive adjustment according to the following criteria; ability to positively relate and interact with other children/members of society, adapt their lifestyle or behavior, maintain emotional control in difficult circumstances, and have improved their school attendance and academic performance.

4.2. Data collection

To collect data, the participants drew pictures which assisted them in telling stories of past resilience experiences. Drawing as a visual presentation provides insight into the ways into which children understand and interpret their world and helps them to express themselves as well as communicate freely (Guillemin, 2004; Weller, 2003). According to MacDougall and Fudge (2001), in-depth interviews seeks to understand the interviewees' perspectives on their lived, experiences and situations as expressed in their own words.

Data were collected in two steps. Firstly, the drawings and stories and then followed by in-depth interviews. Children drew three pictures each reflecting an adverse situation they faced in the past, how they confronted it and the outcome thereof. They were then requested to tell stories from their picture drawings. During interviews, the children were asked to describe the socio-economic situation of their families, their present experiences of adversity and how they were confronting it. The picture drawings, stories and interviews took between 45 min to 1 h per participant.

4.3. Data analysis

This study used the thematic analysis process to analyse qualitative data. As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a

method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.6). The audio recorded stories and interviews were played repeatedly before transcribing. To ensure accuracy, transcripts were checked against audio recordings. Following familiarisation with data, initial codes (data and theory-linked) were generated and organised into potential themes. Data extracts were collated under respective themes. Thereafter, themes were reviewed after re-reading through the collated extracts and the entire data set leading to the formation of a thematic map reflecting coherent themes that tell the overall story about data (past and present resilience experiences) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the final analysis, themes were clearly defined and a detailed analysis written under each theme. This process was aided by Atlas.ti, a computer software which enabled the researchers to store, search, identify data patterns as well as generate audit trails of the data analysis process (Drisko, 2013).

4.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of Pretoria. Future Families gave written permission to do the research. Written consent was obtained from the legal guardians of the participants and written informed assent was obtained from the children participating in the study. The informed consent and assent forms clearly stipulated that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the interview or refuse to answer a question without consequences. The interviews were conducted in the privacy of Future Family’s programme rooms. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all research processes and outputs.

5. Findings

Following the analysis of stories from drawings and interviews, three major themes and sub-themes were identified. The first theme gives a *profile of participants* outlining sex, age, levels of education and socio-economic circumstances. The second theme presents *stories of resilience: past experiences* derived from three pictures reflecting an adverse situation, coping strategy and outcome. The third theme is *present experiences of resilience* and it explores the adverse situations participants face in their daily lives and how they manage to cope *resilience pathways*.

5.1. Theme 1. Participants’ profile

Two of the five participants were females and three males. The

participant ages were from 13 to 18 years and their level of education ranged from Grade 7 to 10. The pseudonyms used in this study are Sandile, Mandha, Vusa, Thabo and Lulu.

5.1.1. Social circumstances

All participants face relational challenges in their families and communities. Sandile, Manhla and Thabo live in fairly small houses accommodating a minimum of 12 members per household. The overcrowding presents unhealthy living conditions, lack of privacy and increased family conflicts due to limited resources. Sandile lives with her mother, siblings, grandmother and other members of the extended family. Her parents divorced before she was born and her father lives in another city. Mandla’s parents are also divorced and he lives with grandparents, uncles and their families. His parents migrated to other provinces and they rarely visit him. Thabo is a single orphan who stays with his mother, siblings and extended family. His father died in a mine accident when he was about 5 years of age. Lulu is a single orphan living in a household affected by HIV. She stays with her mother and other siblings. Vusa’s family are immigrants from the neighbouring country and they live in an informal settlement area. Due to the father’s drinking problems, fights and quarrels are common in the home. All the participants live in communities with people from different cultural backgrounds and characterised by violence, high rates of crime, HIV/AIDS, poverty, unemployment, prostitution, drug and substance abuse.

5.1.2. Economic circumstances

Most of the adults living in the households of all participants are unemployed. The mothers of four participants, with the exception of Vusa receive social grants from the government. However, the income is inadequate because the households are large. Vusa’s father and elder brother are unemployed and survive on piece jobs, whenever they find them. His sister is employed as a domestic worker and earns very little. The foregoing analysis reveal that all participants are exposed to socio-economic risks in their families and communities.

5.2. Theme 2: stories of resilience: past experiences

Theme 2 presents pictures drawn by Sandile, Mandla, Thabo, Vusa and Lulu and stories describing their past resilience experiences and stories describing the risk situation, the coping strategy and outcome. The stories from the pictures are presented as narratives.

Sandile’s drawings



Picture 1: Situation

The first picture shows two girls, Sandile and her best friend. The cheerful face of her friend who is in a relationship with a boyfriend who is much older than her. The boyfriend insists in having sex with her in exchange for money and gifts. Sandile's friend is enticed by the offer. She tries to convince Sandile that there is nothing wrong with her having sex with her boyfriend since their peers were doing it and it is considered a *cool* thing to do. Her friend brushes away Sandile's warnings of either falling pregnant or contracting sexually transmitted diseases by arguing that they will be using condoms for protection. Sandile is worried because she feels that her friend is about to make a mistake.

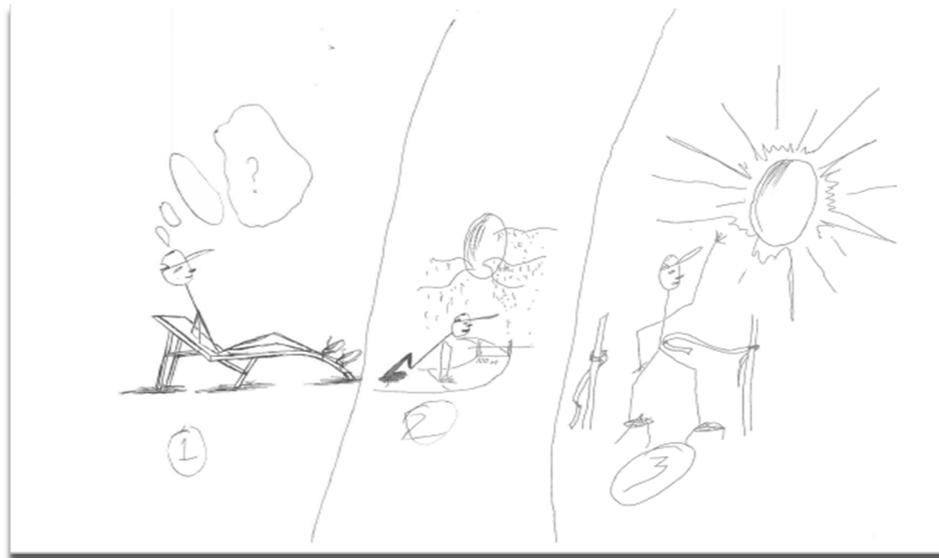
Picture 2: Solution/Coping strategy

Sandile was reasoning with her friend in the second picture. From her Life Skills' training from Future Families and counsel from her mother, she explains the dangers of dating older men, early sexual debut as well as the consequences of giving in to peer pressure. She was also worried about the gossip going around in the neighbourhood, how it would affect her image as well and their friendship. In addition, Sandile feels that such a relationship will affect her friend's performance in school and ruin her future prospects.

Picture 3: Outcome

With Sandile's persistence, her friend was finally convinced that the relationship with an older man and having sex with him was wrong. She took Sandile's advice and broke up the relationship. Sandile was happy because of her positive influence to her friend. The two were glad they came to a mutual understanding and their close friendship was restored.

Mandhla's drawings



Picture 1: Situation

Mandhla is alone, sad and frustrated due to the effects of drug and substance abuse. At this point, he had been expelled from school and was at home. His family members were not happy with him and members of the community considered him a nuisance. Nobody seemed to like him, except his few friends from a gang in the community. Thabo was always in conflict with the law, stealing from his grandmother, neighbours and at the shops in order to buy nyaupe (a highly addictive substance).

Picture 2: Solution/Coping strategy

In the second picture, Mandhla is thinking critically about the consequences of his behaviour. He is not pleased with the damage he was doing to himself (the effects of drugs on his health and personal hygiene) as well as the sorrow he was causing to his family members and community. After a deep introspection, he made a resolution to change his ways. He decided to stop taking drugs and hanging out with bad friends. Although this was not easy, as illustrated in the picture, he felt like he was running through a storm. He approached Future Families for assistance and was referred to a drug rehabilitation programme. Following his successful treatment, Future Families facilitated his re-enrolment in school and provided psychosocial support to avoid a relapse.

Picture 3: Outcome

Mandhla is pleased with his personal transformation as well as improved relationships at home, school and community. He managed to overcome drug addiction and spends his leisure time drawing and writing poetry. As shown in the picture, he feels like the sun is shining in his life again.

Vusa's drawings



Picture 1: Situation

Vusa was being physically assaulted by his brother, who suspected him of having stolen his money. It is one of the brother's episodes of anger which leads to physical abuse. Vusa was vulnerable because there was no-one at home to defend him from the beatings.

Picture 2: Solution/Coping strategy

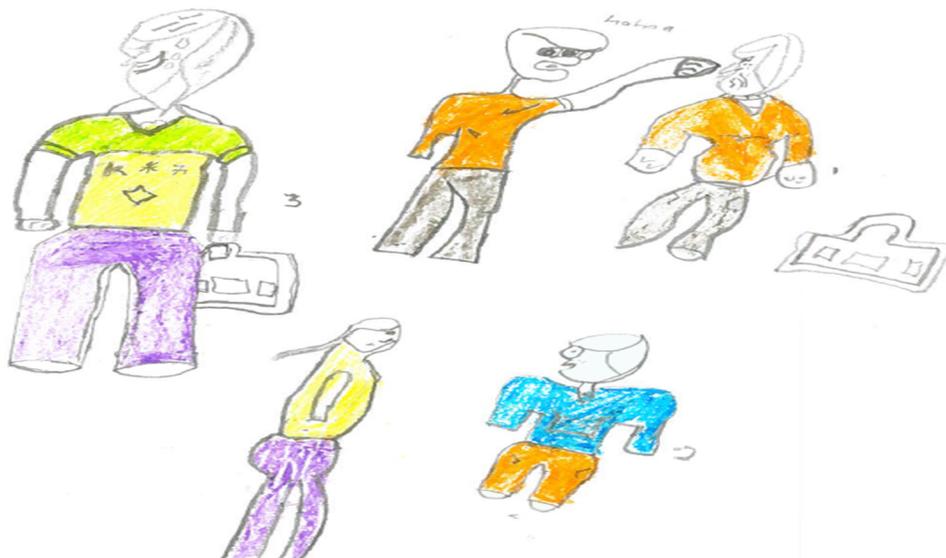
In order to survive further blows, he knelt before his brother, pleaded for forgiveness and promised not to steal again although he claimed that he had not stolen the money. However, when the mother returned home, Vusa reported the issue to the mother who scolded the

big brother and warned him strongly against the use of violence. During, the home visit by a care worker, the mother recommended the brother to get help from Future Families to manage anger and stress.

Picture 3: Outcome

In picture 3, Vusa was happy because there was peace in the home. The money which the brother thought was stolen was in fact misplaced when he was drunk. The brother apologised for wrongfully accusing and beating Vusa. He managed to cheer Vusa up by giving him a cap and cracking some jokes.

Thabo's drawings



Picture 1: Situation

A bully was always beating up Thabo before other learners at school. Thabo felt both sad and embarrassed because he could not protect himself or fight back. He reported the bully to the senior teacher, who was too busy to attend to him. His mother and grandmother could not intervene either, instead they dismissed him saying he was try to find an excuse of avoiding school. Thabo hated going to school and his performance in class was greatly affected.

Picture 2: Solution/Coping strategy

In his desperation, Thabo sought the assistance of a care worker from Future Families. He narrated his ordeal at school and how it was affecting him physically, socially and emotionally. Thabo requested the care worker to advocate on his behalf, both at home and at school. Following a meeting at school, the teacher administered appropriate discipline to the bully. During home visits, the care worker urged Thabo's mother and grandmother to be more supportive of him on issues affecting his emotional well-being and education.

Picture 3: Outcome

Picture 3 shows Thabo carrying his bag and going to school without the fear of being tormented or embarrassed by the bully again. The support of the care worker helped Thabo to regain his confidence and enjoy school again. As a result, there was an improvement in his grades.

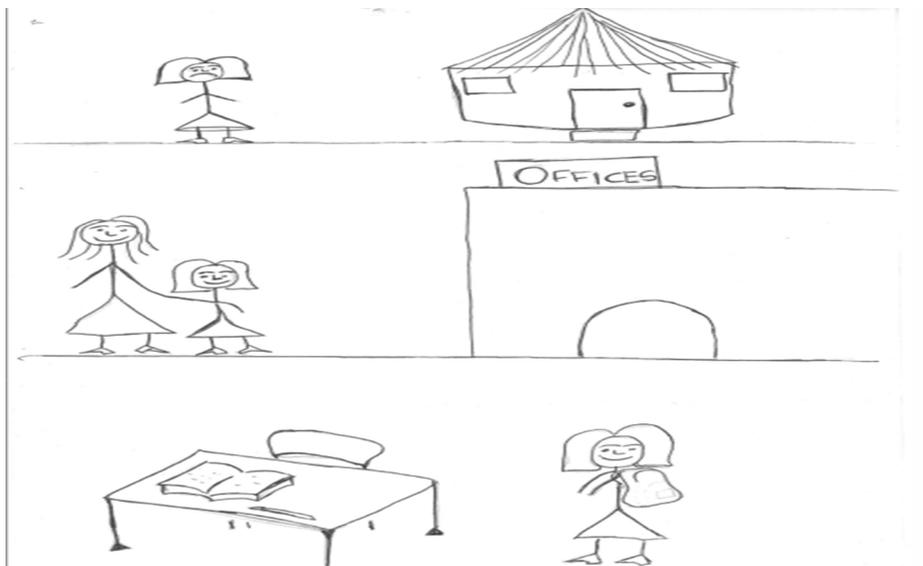
referral letter. Through the social worker's facilitation, Lulu was accepted by a school in the nearby community. Future Families then paid her fees, bought uniforms and other school supplies.

Picture 3: Outcome

Lulu was so happy to be in school at last. She was grateful to the social worker who took up her case and facilitated her enrolment. She quickly made new friends and worked very hard to catch up on lessons she missed while she was out of school.

The analysis of stories from three sets of drawings highlight the risk factors faced with children as individuals, families/homes, extrafamilial relationships, schools and communities. Accordingly, the socio-economic adversities causes emotional distress among the participants. Although the effects are potentially disruptive to their healthy functioning, they establish pathways of resilience through their personal agency, and the support of family members and Future Families. While, some of the personal strategies may seem unconventional (the case of Vusa who admitted to an offence he did not commit), it explains that when young people find themselves in defenceless situations, they can lie to protect themselves. The analysis of past resilience experiences of children reveals the important role played by Future Families (directly or indirectly) in assisting the participants to navigate their complex social ecologies.

Lulu's drawings



Picture 1: Situation

In picture 1, Lulu was very sad because she was alone at home while her siblings and peers were at school. She was worried because she did not know where and when she would start going to school. Due to ill-health and lack of money, her mother had delayed to register her, so she could not be accepted in secondary schools in the community.

Picture 2: Solution/Coping strategy

When the social worker from Future Families visited her home, Lulu explained her situation. The social worker then prepared some supporting letters and approached the Department of Education to get a

5.3. Theme 3: Present resilience experiences

The following findings describe the present resilience experiences that participants face in their day to day life. It presents their perspectives on the nature of adversity and the strategies they use for positive adaptation and effective functioning. Under this theme, three sub-themes were identified from their experiences namely; poverty-related, socially-related and resilience pathways (which identifies the risk factors and coping strategies for positive outcomes).

5.3.1. Poverty-related experiences

All five participants are experiencing income poverty in their households, thus their families are unable to provide them with things

that other young people are privy to. Lulu lives with her mother and seven siblings in a two-bedroomed house. Her mother who is terminally-ill, is not employed and lives on social grants. Once in a while, the uncle provides financial assistance. Lulu, expresses the experience of poverty in the following statement; *“The most difficult problem is living in a big family where a parent is not able to provide adequate food, clothes, school fees and uniforms. It makes one to feel so helpless.”*

Vusa lives in a make-shift house made of plastic and cardboard boxes. He comments about his situation; *“I live in constant fear because in the event of a fire breaking out, we will lose all our belongings. Another challenge is of exposed power lines in our community, several children get electrocuted during the rainy season. My father, brother and sister are not formally employed and their wages are not enough to afford adequate food, clothes and decent accommodation. Our living conditions and family situation makes me feel sad.”*

Although, the children are experiencing poverty in their lives, they have a way of understanding and confronting it. According to Thabo, poverty affects one's self-worth, confidence and happiness. He expresses his views as follows; *“When you don't have fancy clothes and shoes like Nike and Adidas, other kids from rich families look down upon you and make you feel like you are not important. They say bad things to you and show-off. This makes one feel sad and if not careful, one might end up stealing to be like them. I tell myself, that one day, “my future will come alive.” I know if I continue with my education, I will become a lawyer and will buy designer clothes for myself.”*

Thabo also adds the following sentiments; *“Instead of stressing oneself by comparing or competing with others, you should understand your family's economic situation and be content with what you get at the moment.”* Vusa gives his views as follows; *“I understand if my mother tells me that she does not have some money. Therefore, I will not insist in having things that my friends have because our backgrounds are different. For example, you can't expect your parents who are poor to buy you a Galaxy S4 cellphone.”*

Vusa confronts poverty through material support and services provided by Future Families. He says; *“Future Families provides a voucher for groceries and supply my family with inputs for our vegetable garden at the backyard of our house. It also pays for my school fees, transport, uniforms and stationery. Last year, Future Families facilitated a shopping voucher from Mr. Price for me to buy new clothes for Christmas.”*

5.3.2. Social-related experiences

Participants face different kinds of relational problems in their families, school and communities. The ensuing paragraphs highlight the nature of the problems and how different participants confront them.

5.3.2.1. Family/home. Thabo and Lulu are single orphans who lost their fathers when they were very young. Although Thabo still has vivid memories of his father, Lulu don't recall much because she was barely two when her father died. Thabo feels that losing a parent is very difficult, particularly when he sees other boys with their fathers. He says; *“I feel out of place when some boys talk about their fathers as it reminds me of my own and the things I wish I could be doing with him if he were alive.”*

Sandile and Mandhla's parents are divorced. Sandile's father rarely visits her and Mandhla hardly sees both parents. Sandile expresses her feelings as follows; *“I feel that my father does not care about me. He isn't there for me when I need him. I last saw him three months ago when he was visiting my grandmother (his mother) who lives in the neighbourhood. When my friends talk and brag about their fathers, it makes me feel sad.”*

Separation from a parent either through death or divorce affects participants emotionally and materially, however they use different strategies to cope. Thabo says; *“I find great comfort when my uncle visits me and take me out for games. Also, the preacher at church told me that God is my father, so each time I feel depressed, praying will make me feel better.”* Sandile deals with the problem of her absentee father as follows; *“I cover up and lie to other girls about my father. I tell them that he is a loving and caring dad. Only my best friend knows the truth. I also get support from*

my uncles. Sometimes they take me to shops and buy a few things for me. When I see him again, I will tell him that his absence and lack of support makes me feel sad.” Lulu expresses her strategy; *“When I can't get support from my mother, I contact a care worker or social worker from Future Families. When I tell them my situation, they know how to help me.”*

Participants experience conflicts in their homes that disturb their peace and happiness. Vusa complains; *“The most difficult thing in my home is physical and emotional abuse. My parents are always shouting at each other and at us (brother, sister and I) if they suspect any mischief.”* Mandhla describes his uncle as a menace; *“My uncle always causes trouble in the home when he is drunk, although excessive drinking and smoking has destroyed his health. He harasses everyone, including my grandparents.”* Thabo says; *“My little sisters are too noisy and they always disturb me when I am doing my homework.”*

To confront family conflicts, the participants solicit external help and employ some withdrawal strategies. Vusa shares his strategy; *“I talk to care workers if I encounter a problem that I cannot solve at home. The home visits by care workers help a lot in reducing emotional and physical violence as my parents don't want to appear as bad people to them.”* Mandhla says; *“I escape the trouble from my uncle and stress at home by locking myself in the boy's room where I start drawing and reading to calm my mind.”* Thabo employs the following strategy; *“I speak nicely to my sisters and negotiate with them to give me some space until I am through with my homework.”*

5.3.2.2. School. All participants face different school-related challenges. These include bullying at school, lack of school fees, transport, uniforms and stationery, lack of parental support and assistance with homework. Thabo moans over the unkind words and treatment he gets from other learners at school because of his socio-economic condition. He says; *“Other children with parents should not be mean to those without. Those without parents did not choose to be orphans. Also children from rich families should not take advantage of those from poor families. Their cruel words make others to feel bad. If I do not control myself, I might end up reacting negatively towards them.”*

Participants confront school-related challenges through assistance from supportive family members, Future Families and their own personal strengths. Vusa employs the following strategy; *“My big brother helps me with my homework.”* Lulu says; *“Future Families paid my registration fees, part of my school fees, bought me school uniforms, stationery and provide transport fare to school.”* Thabo comments; *“I am now able to ignore cruel words from bullies at school and with the help of Aunt Cathy (my care worker), I am no longer afraid of going to school.”* Sandile says; *“Future Families helps me to solve my problems through life skills training. The homework support classes have helped me improve in difficult subjects, especially Mathematics.”*

5.3.2.3. Community and extrafamilial. The communities that the participants live in are crime-infested because of poverty, unemployment and conflict resulting from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Participants have learnt to avoid harm by safely navigating their way in and out of the community; Vusa says; *“There are many unemployed youth in our community who spend their time in street corners where they are involved in criminal activities and drugs.”* Sandile observes; *“Prostitution and teenage pregnancy are on the increase in my community. Instead of being in schools, you see many girls in parks and loitering at shopping centres.”* According to Lulu; *“There are a lot of problems in our community. Some bad people kidnap children in order to get money. Some mothers spend their time playing cards, gambling away the SASSA [South African Social Security Agency] grants instead of buying food, clothing and paying school fees for their children. Rather than looking for better ways to overcome stress, some people take drugs and alcohol while others commit suicide.”*

Participants overcome community and extrafamilial challenges through self-determination, pursuit of developmental goals, participating in hobbies as well as getting support from good friends, caring

Table 1
Resilience pathways.

Risk factors (individual & social ecologies)	Strategy 1 (Avoidance)	Strategy 2 (Engagement)
Individual	- Avoid unhealthy thoughts and behaviours as well as disruptive activities, people and dangerous places.	Positive engagement of healthy thoughts, behaviours and people. Participate in healthy activities and safe places. Participate in Future Families' OVC programmes including life skills training, home-visits, school and community support activities.
Family/home	- Withdraw oneself from conflicts in the home. - Avoid making unrealistic expectations or demands from parents/caregivers. - Avoid misbehaviours/actions that incite conflicts/fights or affect relationships in the home.	Supportive family members and Future Families' parenting classes, home visits, income-generating projects and psychosocial programmes
Community	- Avoid dark/dangerous spots in the community. - Avoid unhealthy activities/ practices e.g. crime, alcohol and substance abuse, violence in the community.	Supportive communities, faith-based supports and Future Families communities' education and awareness programmes.
Extrafamilial	- Avoid negative influences/peer pressure. - Ignore hurtful words from peers. - Avoid competing and comparing oneself with peers that are better-off.	Supportive peers and Future Family life skills training, school and holiday programmes.
School	- Ignore hurtful or unkind words from other learners. - Withhold sensitive truths that increases your vulnerability to other learners. - Avoid competing and comparing oneself with learners that are better-off.	Supportive learners, supportive teachers and Future Families school support programmes (homework classes and psychosocial programmes)

family members and Future Families. Vusa says; *“I move around with my friends and avoid dark spots in the community. Future Families’ bus picks us up and drop us home when we are playing games, attending homework programmes and life skills classes.”* Mandhla handles community pressures through family support; *“My grandmother and uncle are always giving me good advice. Even though my uncle is not a good role model [because of his drinking problem], he tells me not to follow his footsteps which resulted in him destroying his health and ruining his life.”*

Thabo mentions programmes implemented by Future Families in the community; *“Future Families organises some campaigns that educate our communities on the rights of children, prevention of HIV/AIDS, the dangers of drug and substance abuse as well as teenage pregnancy.”*

As Mandhla reflects; *“The most difficult challenge I ever faced was to overcome peer pressure. I wanted to impress my friends in the community and be accepted by them. I didn’t mind doing anything bad in order to be seen by them and belong to their group. As a result, I started stealing so I could have money to buy drugs. But because of self-determination and the support from Future Families, I overcame peer pressure and drug addiction.”*

Sandile says; *“I do not allow peer pressure to make me do the wrong things like drinking, smoking or having early sex. I want to complete my education, get a good career and earn a lot of money. I don’t want to be like other girls who get pregnant in school and end up being like their mothers. Their mothers left school in Grade 8 and they want to do the same. They have many babies from different fathers, do not work and depend on SASSA. I don’t want that kind of life.”* Vusa comments; *“I don’t look for girls because I do not want anything that disrupts my studies. If I have sex and make someone pregnant, how will I provide for the girl and the child, when I am also being supported by parents who are also struggling to make ends meet? I would rather look for volunteering opportunities to gain useful skills instead of wasting my time in street corners looking for girls, crime and drugs”*

In confronting both poverty and relational-related adversities and their emotional effects, Thabo, speaks fondly of the care worker called Aunty Cathy (not her real name). *“I get excellent support from Aunt Cathy. She knows me very well. She is able to tell when I am sad and always asks if something is bothering me. She sometimes gives me small gifts, plays games with me and tells funny stories of her childhood in the village. I always go to her when there is a problem I can’t solve or an issue I don’t understand. I know she will always be there for me.”*

The analysis of present experiences of resilience are similar to those recounted from past experiences. However, the latter captures the participants’ perspectives with greater depth. This is reflected by their views on socio-economic adversities and how they make them feel.

While, they are aware of their realities (relational challenges and poverty), their understanding of adversity does not mean that they do not desire or aspire for better things or conditions in life. If given a choice, they would prefer to have supportive adults, especially loving and caring fathers and also have access to better food, clothes and living conditions. However, by understanding and accepting their reality, they are better able to manage their expectations and know the level of resources or support they are able to draw from their current relationships. Again, they have developed the emotional capacity to ignore the unkind words or treatment from other well-to-do peers. By so-doing, their socio-economic disadvantages do not rob them of their self-worth, confidence and ability to dream. On the contrary, their experiences of adversity serve as a motivator to remain focused on their developmental goals. Their positive outlook on life gives them the capacity to hope that their life outcomes will certainly be better-off than their parents’, relatives’, peers’ and community members’. The final analysis below highlights resilience pathways, detailing the risks factors and strategies used to promote positive adjustment among participants.

5.3.3. Resilience pathways

As shown in Table 1 below, families/home, communities, extra-familial relationships, schools and individuals are risk factors that are potentially disruptive to the developmental trajectories of children. The identified risk factors are amplified by HIV and AIDS, poverty and migration. However, the participants use *avoidance and engagement* strategies for positive adaptation and effective functioning in the face of socio-economic adversities. The participants’ capacity to avoid disruptive people, activities, thoughts and places help them to survive and navigate their way in unsafe environments. In other words, they use their agency to make decisions and choices that protect them from physical harm and other negative life outcomes. On the other hand, their positive engagement with supportive relationships with family members, communities, peers, learners and care workers and social workers from Future Families’ programmes increases their access to developmental resources. Also, their ability to choose healthy thoughts, behaviors, activities and places enhances their psychosocial well-being.

As identified from Table 1, the strategies used by participants help them to adjust positively despite the identified risks in their social ecologies. The strategies enable them to achieve better-than-expected outcomes as individuals, at home, school and in the community. They are able to relate well with family members, friends, members of the community and other learners at school. By being sensitive to the needs

of others, influencing other peers positively and being respectful to parents and other family members (even if they are not good role models), the participants demonstrate the *Ubuntu* values. The participants also demonstrate the capacity to solve problems, pursue developmental goals, seek for support from caring adults (familial or non-familial) as well as overcome negative influences from peer pressure and other misbehaviors in schools and communities such as crime, drug and substance abuse, dropping out of school, physical aggression, early sex debut and prostitution. The above strengths are evidence to participants' cognitive and motivational competences, behavioral and social skills as well as emotional stability. Furthermore, the role played by Future Families in strengthening the participants and their social ecologies protect the participants from the effects of HIV/AIDS, poverty and migration.

6. Discussion

In this study, children experience psychosocial distress resulting from poverty, HIV and AIDS and migration. However, the OVC are able to rise above their circumstances through resilience strategies (avoidance and engagement). The engagement strategies resonate with resilience enablers identified among youth in South Africa that include; personal strength, supportive family, peers, schools, community, faith-based supports and cultural heritage (Theron, 2017). In alignment with resilience theory, the researchers wanted to know what it is about the OVC and their other systems that enable them to adapt positively and function effectively despite their socio-economic conditions (Van Breda & Theron, 2018). This study has confirmed that relationships with significant others are core to children's healthy psycho-social development (Masten & Obradovic, 2008). Taking cognisance of the risks factors and the importance of supportive relationships, there is a great need for multilevel interventions that improve the links between children, families, schools and communities (Coetzee, 2015). Through the provision of holistic programmes, Future Families provide that important link, becoming a catalyst for resilience-building. Accordingly, Future Families' OVC programmes show that the NPO values, facilitates and supports personal and relational enablers of resilience (Van Breda & Theron, 2018).

The findings confirm that social ecology describes individuals' resilient outcomes more than their internal factors and the resilience processes as being relational or social as opposed to individual characteristics (Ungar, 2012b). The focus of Future Families' OVC programmes affirms that families play an important role in social and economic development of children and the care and material support they provide determine children's outcomes (Martin, Hall and Lake, 2018). However, resilience is contextual and as such always involves the presence of risk (Ungar, 2012b). As Rutter (2012) states, "coping with challenge is a normal feature of development" and as such the emphasis should not be on risks *per se* but should include protective factors (p.33). Resilience cuts across the lifespan with different experiences manifesting before, during and after adversity. Hence, the OVC in this study "should not be considered to be resilient in an absolute or unchanging sense" (Supkoff, Puig & Sroufe, 2012, p.128). While positive circumstances play a role in resilience, it is critical that the individual maintains positive adaptation consistently and remains flexible in confronting adversity (Supkoff, Puig, & Sroufe, 2012). This implies that OVC can behave in a more or less adaptive fashion as circumstances change (Supkoff et al., 2012). In this study, Future Families' programmes provide a pathway to resilience by mobilising both external and internal resources that lead to positive adaptation and functioning of OVC (Supkoff et al., 2012). As reaffirmed by Thabethe, Mhatha, and Mtapuri (2016), NPOs go beyond the provision of physical or material resources but through their psychosocial programmes, provide emotional and psychological support which promote resilience-building among OVC.

7. Limitation

Although, this study was able to establish the resilience pathways of OVC facing adversities as a result of HIV, poverty and migration in poor, urban communities of South Africa, the experiences may vary according to context and race. The participants were drawn from Black and Coloured communities and did not include children from the Indian and White backgrounds as well as those in rural settings of South Africa. Additionally, the children who participated in the study were beneficiaries of Future Families drawn from five sites of programmes being implemented in Gauteng Province. Therefore, findings may not be reflective of other children who may have experienced the resilience phenomenon and are not part of the Future Families programmes. However, this study provides opportunities for further enquiry into resilience-building strategies for children in different social contexts.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, children facing adversities need to "receive specific policy attention and dedicated resources, otherwise they are in danger of being left behind despite continuing human progress in most countries and communities (Human Development Report, 2014, p. 2). So, OVC need opportunities to share their experiences and views on issues affecting them as well as receive adequate resources to meet their developmental needs. By participating in resilience research, OVC were able to share their past and present resilience experiences, thereby contributing to knowledge on the phenomenon. Through establishing resilience pathways, OVC's demonstrated their capability to achieve better-than-expected outcomes as individuals, at home, school and in the community despite socio-economic adversities. Thus, being called an 'OVC' is not a permanent identity that deprives them of their potentials and capacity to dream. Accordingly, by exercising personal agency, OVC are able to participate meaningfully in their own development. Nevertheless, as alluded by Van Breda (2018), the resilience processes lie not just in the individual or in the environment, but in the way these transact. Hence, individuals and their social ecologies are important in resilience-building processes. According to this study, Future Families is the broker that facilitates the successful outcome of the transaction between OVC and their social ecologies. Therefore, in conclusion, OVC participation in research, policy and practice and NPOs similar to Future Families should be supported for sustainable resilience-building processes.

Authors' statement

Dr. Pamhidzayi Berejena Mhongera: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, visualization, roles/writing-original draft, writing-review and editing.

Professor Antoinette Lombard: funding acquisition, project administration, resources, software, supervision, validation, review and editing.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declared that there is no Conflict of Interest.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

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