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Resilience research with South African youth: caveats and ethical complexities

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Studies of resilience, or the process of adjusting well to major challenges commonly associated with negative outcomes, have proliferated in recent years. Despite the popularity of this research focus, there are suggestions (anecdotal and published) that the study of resilience needs to be interrogated. In this article, I respond to these suggestions by offering a synthesis of the international critiques (published from 2000 to 2012) levelled at youth resilience studies. International critiques are rooted in a post-structuralist, transactional-ecological understanding of resilience processes, which differs from earlier person-focused conceptualisations, and which explains positive adaptation as a dynamic collaboration between youth and their social ecologies. Essentially, these critiques highlight five pitfalls that have the potential to undermine ethical and meaningful resilience research. To avoid these pitfalls resilience researchers need to: consider the role of social ecologies when youth do not resile; pay attention to the hidden costs of resilience; measure resilience accurately and comprehensively; engage in evidence-based research practice; and account for how culture and context nuance resilience processes. Using this synthesis, I then appraise studies of South African youth resilience (1990–2011) to illustrate how local studies have only partially acknowledged the caveats and ethical complexities inherent in investigations into processes of positive adjustment. I argue that unidimensional and non-systemic studies of resilience do, indeed, need questioning, but that mindful, participatory studies of resilience, grounded in post-structuralist conceptualisations of hardiness, should be welcomed. In conclusion, I suggest possible future directions for resilience research among South African youth that draw on a synthesis of best practices that have been demonstrated empirically.

Keywords: ethics; post-structuralist; resilience; social ecology; transactional-ecological; youth

"Resilience research is unethical. How dare we expect youth, who have been placed at risk by our society, to learn to be resilient?" These were the words of a respected South African academic serving on a prestigious grant review panel.[1] This, and similar sentiments expressed by several other South African academics and reviewers of resilience-focused grant/research proposals,[2] prompted me to ponder the ethics of resilience research, particularly in the South African context where youth are perennially placed at risk of negative outcomes (Reddy et al., 2010). Is the study of youth resilience, or youths' positive adjustment to considerable hardship (Masten, 2001), indeed unethical? Does it imply, as a subsequent reviewer suggested,[3] that studies of positive adjustment and interventions towards resilience perpetuate a status quo of adversity: as long as the youth are resilient, societies are not compelled towards transformation?

In this article, I aim to answer the above questions. I am guided by Allan's (2008) understanding of ethical behaviour as that which values people's dignity and rights, avoids doing harm, promotes relational integrity, encourages dependable interactions, advances justice and autonomy, sponsors sincere and trustworthy messages, and fosters confidence. In other words, ethical research is that which aims to "do most good" (Moletsane, Mitchell, Smith, & Chisholm, 2008, p. 114). To offer a response as to whether resilience research can be broadly described as ethical (or not), I provide critical comment on the caveats involved in the study of youths' positive adjustment to significant adversity. My response is facilitated, firstly, by a review of international commentary on sensitive issues inherent in the research of youth resilience, thereby creating a synthesis of the documented caveats in resilience research. In the second part of my response I review South African studies of youth resilience (1990–2011) with a specific focus on how the aforementioned synthesized complexities have been acknowledged in studies of South African youths' trajectories of positive adaptation. As such, qualitative research synthesis (Suri, 2011) is the methodology on which this article rests.

I use this review to urge continued exploration of the transactional processes that underpin youths' positive adaptation to challenging circumstances, albeit in an ethical manner that respects the complexities and caveats inherent in notions of positive adjustment. The thesis of this article could buttress ethically minded psychology students' and researchers' efforts to obtain permission to conduct resilience-oriented research or requisite funding and/or support ethics committees, social and health science faculties, funding agencies, advocacy groups, and research foundations to make informed decisions about resilience-related research.

Resilience explained

Resilience cannot be conceptualised in contexts that are risk-free. To make a judgement of resilience, there must be evidence of positive adjustment to significant adversity (Masten, 2001). Although adversity can potentially take many forms, much resilience research continues to be done in contexts of loss and grief (e.g. Mancini & Bonanno, 2011), when individuals are challenged by serious mental illness (e.g. Meyer & Mueser, 2011) or by rape and sexual assault (e.g. Resnick, Guille, McCauley, & Kilpatrick, 2011), in the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters (e.g. Johnson & Galea, 2011) or terrorism (e.g. Hobfoll, Hall, Horsey, & Lamoureux, 2011), and in poverty-stricken ecologies (e.g. Buckner & Waters, 2011). Thus, the very contexts in which resilience might be observed are often concomitant with violations of basic human rights. Although politicians, community and religious leaders, academics, service providers, mental health practitioners, students, and others clamour for such contexts to be eradicated, they remain a reality. This actuality charges us as psychologists to consider how best to support fellow human beings towards optimal coping with, and within, life-worlds that are suboptimal.

The rationale for resilience research has always been a positive support ethic: a deeper understanding of the processes that encourage people towards healthy functioning, despite circumstances that predict unhealthy functioning, could be used to enable others in similar dire circumstances (Masten, Monn, & Supkoff, 2011; Rutter, 2012). There are multiple reports of how enhanced understandings of the processes underpinning resilience have contributed to programmes, policies, preventive strategies, and interventions that have targeted, sustained, or buffered positive development and adaptation in risk-saturated contexts (Luthar, 2006; Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009; Torres, Southwick, & Mayes, 2011).

The almost half-century of resilience-focused studies have shown conclusively that there is heterogeneity in how individuals and communities adjust to adversity (Rutter, 2006). This diversity extends to positive adjustment, too (Masten & Wright, 2010), not just in terms of what encourages individuals to resile, but also in terms of how positive adjustment is defined across contexts and cultures (Bottrell, 2009). In the initial stages of resilience research, positive responses were attributed to intrapersonal strengths, but this person-centred approach was soon replaced with more complex, constructivist theories that attributed healthy adaptation to the interactive efforts of individuals and their social ecologies (Luthar, 2006). In a summary of the findings emerging from at least 40 years of research, Masten and Wright (2010) reported that resilience-promoting interactions were embedded in basic protective systems, including positive attachment, self-regulation processes, opportunities for agency and mastery, reasoning, and problem solving, supported by effective executive functioning, meaning making, and culture and religion. Within each of these systems, young people had access to varying and multiple resources that nurtured resilience. In other words, as resilience research progressed, researchers advocated a post-structuralist understanding that multiple, variable processes informed resilience and that young people *and* their social ecologies contributed to processes of positive adjustment (Lau & van Niekerk, 2011; Ungar, 2011).

Although more recent, post-structuralist resilience research has crystallised conceptualisations of resilience as a complex, dynamic, person←→context transaction (Lerner, 2006, p. 47), authoritative resilience scholars (Masten et al., 2011; Masten & Wright, 2010; Rutter, 2012; Ungar, 2012) urge that the study of resilience is incomplete. In particular, extant theories of how and why people resile have originated in Eurocentric, economically privileged contexts (Masten & Wright, 2010). In so

doing, these theories are enmeshed in western norms of positive adjustment and western accounts of the processes that nurture healthy functioning. There is, therefore, an obligation to explore definitions and processes of resilience from Africentric, and other non-western, world views and within such diverse cultural contexts.

Caveats and complexities in resilience research: concerns reported in the international literature

In the section that follows I synthesize the concerns relating to the study of resilience, as reported in the international literature. I precede this synthesis with a brief description of the methodology underpinning it.

Methodology

To create a synthesis that facilitates comment on the caveats and complexities in resilience research, I conducted a thematic review of purposefully sampled articles (Suri, 2011). The inclusion criteria were as follows: I included only internationally indexed journal articles (i.e. those included in the International Bibliography of Social Sciences and Web of Science) and/or book chapters that focused on youth resilience and commented critically on the study of resilience (i.e. reported caveats, broad limitations, criticisms, and/or ethical complexities). Because resilience-focused publications are prolific (Masten, 2011), I excluded pre-2000 publications. I sampled each included publication until no new themes relating to the focus of this article emerged. To generate such themes, I employed thematic content analysis. I preface the synthesis below with an acknowledgment that the publications I drew on are not exhaustive and that my exclusion of articles not published in internationally indexed journals is tantamount to a sampling bias.

Findings

Despite the positive support ethic that has traditionally informed resilience research, the international literature draws attention to a number of caveats inherent in studies of resilience processes. These caveats can be synthesised into five themes, as presented below:

Youth blamed for vulnerability

The first of the caveats relates to earlier conceptualisations of resilience as a person-centred rather than person←→context (Lerner, 2006) construct. A lamentable consequence of this misunderstanding was the castigation of young people who apparently failed to resile: as resilience studies drew attention to trajectories of competence in contexts of risk, there was a tendency to hold individuals accountable when they were less than competent. These judgements were made without accounting for ways in which contextual limitations might have contributed to maladjusted outcomes (Seccombe, 2002; Rutter, 2005; Ungar, 2011). In many investigations into, and explanations of, resilience, there was little understanding that "... the gendered, raced and classed positioning of the individual renders the odds for her/his positive adaptations a largely social formula" (Bottrell, 2009, p. 332).

In recognition of the limitations implicit in understanding positive adaptation as an individual competence, the focus of international resilience research agendas shifted to understanding resilience from a systems framework that foregrounded health-affirming transactions between young people and their social ecologies (Bottrell, 2009; Masten & Wright, 2010; Sapienza & Masten, 2011; Ungar, 2011; 2012). Even in studies of the genetic pathways to resilience, researchers were attentive to gene-environment interactions, thereby endorsing the growing understanding that multilevel variables shaped the biology and neurobiology of resilience (Cicchetti, 2010; Sapienza & Masten, 2011). Nevertheless, the danger remained that some mental health practitioners and researchers endorsed research agendas, theories, and preventive and therapeutic interventions that foregrounded the role of the individual in resilience processes.

Too little evidence-based practice

Masten (2001) warned that explanations of resilience needed to do more than acknowledge that

children were ecologically nested. She argued that the emphasis had to shift to understanding that children were threatened when adversity corroded basic protective systems found within social ecologies and focus on active promotion of these systems. To promote resilience, interventions ideally needed to prevent or reduce risk, augment resilience-promoting resources, and/or mobilise protective systems and resilience-promoting processes (Masten et al., 2009). Herein lies the second caveat: many studies of resilience do not translate systemic understandings into empirically verified interventions, more particularly interventions that promote resilience in culturally sensitive ways (Luthar, 2006; Masten & Wright, 2010). In fact, Masten (2011, p. 503) urged that the original supportive mission underpinning resilience work (i.e. understanding resilience well enough to promote it) be reformulated as "to promote resilience well enough to understand it". In essence, this tasks resilience researchers and psychologists (among others) with theorising about processes of resilience, applying these hypotheses in scientifically responsible and culturally relevant ways, and translating emerging findings into theories that might accelerate systemic supports of positive functioning.

The costs of resilience

A third caveat is found in the dynamic nature of resilience and concomitant reports of uneven patterns of adaptation over time and/or domains of functioning (Buckner & Waters, 2011; Luthar, 2006). For example, youths who demonstrate resilience in one domain of functioning (e.g. academic achievement at school) may demonstrate vulnerability in another (e.g. negative social relationships within the peer group or poor mental health). Classifying a young person as generally resilient has the potential to create unrealistic expectations of consistent healthy functioning. More worryingly, international researchers have pointed out that some young people pay a price for resilient functioning: resilience in one developmental phase, or in one domain of functioning, may exact concurrent or deferred tolls in others, or mask distress in another (Easterbrooks, Chaudhuri, Bartlett, & Copeman, 2010; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Likewise, the resilience of one person or group may jeopardise the positive adjustment of another (Davis, 2005). This caveat complicates resilience-focused researchers' interpretations of their findings and demands comprehensive, sensitive explorations of resilience rather than a narrow focus on overt behavioural indicators of resilience only (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003).

Flawed measurements of resilience

A fourth, well-published caution relates to how resilience is measured. As early as 2000, Luthar et al. (2000) summarised the criticisms levelled at how resilience was being measured and concluded that some of these criticisms were valid. These include the varied operationalisation of the concept of resilience, overemphasis on resiliency (a person-centred measurement of resilience) as opposed to resilience (a process-focused understanding), and imprecise and/or overly general definitions of protective processes and resilient outcomes. Subsequently, international researchers advocated that for measurements of resilience to be more meaningful, they needed to embrace qualitative and mixed methodologies that would give voice to youths' and communities' own understanding of the meanings of, and processes integral to, resilience (Cameron, Theron, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2011; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011).

Inadequate attention to cultural and contextual influences

Finally, there is a danger in conceptualising resilience as a construct that is stable across cultures (Bottrell, 2009; Ungar, 2012). Although there is international consensus that generic processes inform resilience, these processes are shaped by specific cultural contexts (Masten & Wright, 2010). For example, in a five-country study of youth resilience, the youth all reported attachment processes as instrumental to their resilience, but the attachment figures were influenced by cultural norms (Cameron et al., in press). For this reason, the international literature urges scrutiny of how culture, or the conventions and beliefs of a defined group, shapes definitions of resilience, as well as resilience processes (Masten, 2011; Ungar, 2011; 2012).

Recognition of caveats and complexities in South African studies of youth resilience

In this next section, I review studies of South African youth resilience to comment critically on their recognition of the caveats associated with resilience research, as synthesized above. I comment briefly on the methodology, before providing a comparative appraisal.

Methodology

Theron and Theron (2010) meta-analysed studies of South African youth resilience published in indexed journals between 1990 and 2008. In addition to the studies they reported, I reviewed studies published from 2009 to 2011 (see Table 1). With regard to the 2009–2011 studies, I sampled only internationally indexed journal articles (i.e., those included in the International Bibliography of Social Sciences and Web of Science) and, as in Theron and Theron's (2010) review, only those that explained South African youth resilience and contained the word "resilience" in their titles or keywords. Once again, I acknowledge the potential sampling bias in the aforementioned inclusion criteria.

Findings

Scrutiny of the studies of South African youth resilience (1990–2011) suggests meagre attention to the caveats and complexities inherent in resilience research. In summary, with the exception of the study by Collings (2003), there was no recognition in the studies of South African youth resilience that positive adjustment might come at a cost. There was only scant recognition of the inconsistency of resilience: Lau and van Niekerk (2011) reported that their participants' resilience coexisted with vulnerability, and Dass-Brailsford (2005) cautioned against using resilient functioning to predict long-term adaptation. Similarly, pre-2009, there was little reporting of interventions aimed at promoting resilience among the youth (Theron & Theron, 2010). Of these, only three (Jewitt, 2001; Kruger & Prinsloo, 2008; Theron, 2006) commented critically on the (in)effectiveness of the documented interventions. Post-2009, only Ebersöhn (2010) reported on an intervention — career counselling — and how this advanced youths' resilience.

Theron and Theron (2010) critiqued the methodological approaches of studies of South African youth resilience prior to 2009, primarily because many studies were based on non-representative, small samples and/or utilised questionnaires that were not resilience-specific, and because of an absence of longitudinal data crucial to understanding the dynamic nature of resilience. Theron and Theron (2010) also urged creative, participatory qualitative approaches and greater use of mixed methodologies in future studies. The post-2009 studies showed a preference for qualitative methodologies with some indication of visual, participatory methodologies, but no evidence of mixed methods designs or longitudinal studies (see Table 1).

In most published studies of South African youth resilience, there was sensitivity to explaining resilience as a complex process. The 2009–2011 studies (see Table 1) and the majority of studies prior to 2009 (Theron & Theron, 2010) explained resilience as a complex, socio-ecologically nested transaction. Although the authors did not, in the main, caution against interpretations of resilience that could be used to scapegoat youth who presented as vulnerable, there was only isolated foregrounding of youth in the published accounts of resilience. Occasionally, the understanding that resilience was a systemically embedded process was associated with recommendations for community or school based support for children placed at risk (see Germann, 2005; Johnson & Lazarus, 2008; Pillay & Nesengani, 2006; Theron, 2007; Theron & Dunn, 2010). However, this understanding was less frequently associated with overt calls to address environmental and historical barriers in order to nurture youth resilience (see Barbarin, Richter, & de Wet, 2001; Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Pillay & Nesengani, 2006).

On a more positive note, the 2009–2011 studies of South African youth resilience all acknowledged and, in some instances, emphasised (see Table 1) that cultural ties shaped youths' resilience processes. This suggests progress compared to the 1990–2008 studies of South African youth resilience, which largely neglected to consider how participants' cultural affiliations contributed to their resilience processes (Theron & Theron, 2010).

Table 1. Summary of studies of South African youth resilience, 2009–2011

Year	Authors	Focus	Sensitivities to caveats and complexities in resilience research
2009	Veeran & Morgan	The role of culture in resilience among Irish and South African youth	Emphasis on resilience as a process influenced by culture
2010	Ebersöhn	Youth resilience and career counselling, with particular emphasis on how quadrant mapping enabled educational psychology students to support rural black youth	Recognition of contribution of context and culture to youth resilience; use of qualitative methodologies
	Malindi & Theron	The hidden resilience of street youth	Acknowledgment of mainstream conceptualisations of resilience processes; use of qualitative methodologies (individual and focus group interviews)
	Phasha	Resilience among African survivors of child sexual abuse	Emphasis on resilience as a process influenced by culture; use of qualitative methodologies (individual interviews)
	Theron & Dunn	Post-divorce resilience among white, Afrikaans-speaking adolescents	Recognition of the contribution of context and culture to youth resilience; use of qualitative methodologies (individual interviews)
	Theron & Malindi	Resilience among street youth	Recognition of the contribution of context and culture to youth resilience; use of qualitative methodologies (individual and focus group interviews)
2011	Lau & Van Niekerk	Resilience among township youth burn victims	Recognition of the contribution of context and culture to youth resilience; use of qualitative methodologies; recognition that resilience coexists with fragility (individual interviews)
	Mampane & Bouwer	The role of township schools in youth resilience	Recognition of how schools as social ecologies influence resilience; use of qualitative methodologies (focus group interviews using the Interactive Qualitative Analysis method)
	Odendaal, Brink & Theron	Culturally-informed schemas (personal constructions) and youth resilience	Recognition of how sociocultural ecologies and personal constructions shape resilience with a focus on how Rorschach interpretations can be used to explore this (individual interviews and Rorschach projection test)
	Pienaar, Swanepoel, van Rensburg, & Heunis	Resilience among children orphaned by AIDS and living in residential care	Recognition of contribution of context and culture to youth resilience; use of qualitative methodologies

Table 1. Continued

Year	Authors	Focus	Sensitivities to caveats and complexities in resilience research
2011	Theron et al.	Cultural roots of youth resilience	Emphasis on resilience as a transaction influenced by culture; use of qualitative methodologies (individual interviews, photo elicitation, and video documentation)
	Ungar, Theron, & Didkowsky	Adolescents' contributions to their families' well-being and resilience	Emphasis on resilience as a reciprocal process influenced by cultural values and practices that may be devalued by the "mainstream"; use of qualitative methodologies (individual interviews, photo elicitation, and video documentation)

Is the study of positive adjustment among South African youth unethical?

In what follows, I merge the findings from the two preceding sections to provide a critical response to the central question of this article: Is the study of positive adjustment among South African youth unethical? Viewing prior studies of South African youth resilience from the lens of the synthesized caveats potentiates additional questions: Should studies of South African youth resilience continue? How should such studies best proceed?

Given that local studies have, to date, done little to explicitly discourage the scape-goating of young people made vulnerable by their ecologies, often not spoken out against non-systemic interventions, disregarded the possible price of resilience, employed feeble measurements at times, or offered explanations of resilience that were biased towards western thinking, researcher inattention to the known pitfalls is transparent. This inattention could explain censure of local resilience studies (such as that of the panellist referred to at the outset of this article): overlooking these known caveats devalues youths' dignity and rights, potentially does harm, discourages relational integrity and dependable interactions, retards promotion of justice, autonomy, and trustworthy findings, and dampens confidence — in short, breaches ethics (Allan, 2008). It is possible that such a breach was not intentional, but the consequence of researcher unawareness of the body of resilience literature that raises concerns about how positive adjustment is defined, researched, and reported. Likewise, it might relate to research paradigms that are not constructivist, pragmatic, or transformative (Mertens, 2009), or theoretical frameworks that are non-systemic. Whatever the reason, this cannot justify a continuation of resilience-directed research or practice that does not "do most good" (Moletsane et al., 2008).

Most glaring in the research of South African youth resilience thus far is the disregard for the (mostly psychological) expenses (see Luthar & Zelazo, 2003) that resilient functioning potentially exacts. Likewise, scientific accounts of interventions to augment South African youths' resilience have been under-reported in locally and internationally indexed journals. As psychologist-researchers, we are culpable of unethical behaviour in this regard. We are also guilty of not explicitly advocating social change. The lone voices of Barbarin et al. (2001), Dass-Brailsford (2005), and Pillay and Nesengani (2006), calling for structural change as complementary pathways to resilience, illustrate socially responsible interpretations of resilience, particularly in a South African context, which continues to be dominated by social inequalities and injustices. Their example aligns well with Ungar's (2012, p. 28) exhortation to researchers and practitioners to shift "attention to the capacities of individuals to a more complex understanding of the capacity of social and physical ecologies to potentiate ... protective processes ...".

However, drawing the conclusion that studies of South African youth resilience have, in general, not promoted ethical practices does not mean that the study of positive adjustment is unethical. In fact, not to study resilience would be unethical: we have an ongoing ethical imperative to learn more

about the systemically embedded processes that encourage our youth to resile (Masten, 2011; Rutter, 2012; Ungar, 2012). This imperative implies a post-structuralist, transactional-ecological understanding of resilience with a concomitant ethic of investigating *culturally-sensitive* ways to best prevent and diminish risk, augment resilience-promoting resources, and/or mobilise protective systems and resilience-promoting processes (Masten et al., 2009; Masten & Wright, 2010; Ungar, 2011). Put differently, this understanding demands that social ecologies be understood as co-responsible for youths' resilience and must, therefore, be challenged and transformed to this end. Thus, when resilience is understood as a dynamic person←→context transaction (Lerner, 2006), then the study of resilience cannot mean that social ecologies go unchallenged and unchanged.

The answer to the question framing this article is, therefore, conditional. Studies of positive adjustment can be potentially unethical, depending on whether researchers are disrespectful of the recognised pitfalls in resilience-focused research. However, when psychologist-researchers are well versed in constructivist understandings of resilience, they are in a position to address the caveats inherent in resilience research, thereby enabling youth and their social ecologies to advance resilience. In short, resilience research agendas should neither focus exclusively on youth, nor solely on their social ecologies; the focus should be systemic and foreground transactions that promote positive adjustment. With reference to proposal writing for postgraduate, grant, and/or ethical review purposes, this translates into researcher responsibility to clarify resilience as a bidirectional, socio-ecologically embedded process and to comment unambiguously on the social change agenda implicit in post-structuralist understandings of resilience. Simultaneously, researcher-psychologists have a psycho-educational task to educate students, academic and professional peers, and communities about the complex, multilevel processes inherent in positive adjustment, the potential costs of these processes, and the need to study the promotion of resilience in diverse South African contexts.

Possible ways forward

To summarise, studying the processes underpinning South African youths' positive adjustment is a complex undertaking that requires judicious, reflective practice. Because of the multifaceted, dynamic nature of resilience, researchers are particularly accountable in how they define, operationalise, and measure resilience and how they intervene towards resilience. In the international literature, one response to the caveats inherent in resilience research has been to advocate a framework of Five Ms (Masten, 2011; Masten et al., 2011; see Table 2). This framework encourages researchers and practitioners to engage purposively in contextually and culturally relevant research activities that accentuate the positive within the negative, assess systemic contributors to resilience in scientifically defendable ways, and promote multilevel, holistic theories of, and interventions towards, positive functioning.

A second response can be found in Ungar's (2011, pp. 4-10) four principles of a social ecological conceptualisation of resilience (see Table 3). Ungar's principles of decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity urge research practices that do not trivialise the intricacy of nested resilience-promoting transactions over time and across contexts and cultures.

Both of the above models emphasise that for resilience research to be ethical, it cannot be disconnected from the sociocultural context in which the study takes place. Instead, responsible research respects a given social ecology in terms of how resilience is operationalised, measured, explained, and promoted. In recent resilience-focused studies, this respect has extended to the inclusion of advisory panels (Cameron et al., in press; Didkowsky, Ungar, & Liebenberg, 2010; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). These panels, made up of adults and youths drawn from the communities where the research is taking place, participate in the design of the project, co-interpret the findings emerging from the studies, and guard against unethical and socially unjust research practices. Thus, cognisance of these models and practices, as well as careful, culturally sensitive application of them, presents the opportunity to address the caveats inherent in resilience research in future studies of how and why South African youth adjust positively to challenging lifeworlds (see Table 4).

Table 2. The Five Ms (Adapted from the descriptions by Masten, 2011, pp. 494-503; Masten et al., 2011, pp. 114-115; and Masten & Wright, 2010, pp. 229-230)

1st M	Mission	The overall mission is to understand resilience well enough to promote it. Toxic contexts are not ignored, but positive outcomes within these contexts are postulated. These outcomes are aligned with local norms of development and positive outcomes.
2nd M	Models	Resilience-oriented models emphasise strengths, assets, promotive processes, and protective processes. Nevertheless, they also account for risks and vulnerabilities.
3rd M	Measures	Assessments are not only of risk, but respect the variable nature of exposure to risk (even within groups). There is also culturally sensitive assessment of positive predictors, positive outcomes, and positive change. Ideally, measurement needs to be longitudinal.
4th M	Methods	Multiple methods are used, including strategies that investigate and reduce risk exposure, investigate and amplify resources or access to resources, mobilise basic protective systems, sustain basic protective systems, and/or generate positive cascades (i.e., improve cognitive systems).
5th M	Multilevel approaches	Resilience should ideally be promoted systemically and across several levels of analysis. This could imply multidisciplinary collaboration, but certainly advocates recognition of systems theory and attention to the roles of culture and context.

Table 3. A social ecological conceptualisation of resilience (Adapted from the description by Ungar, 2011, pp. 4-10)

Principle 1: Decentrality	A social ecological conceptualisation of resilience emphasises the interactions between individuals and their environments as potentially resilience-promoting; it decentres the individual. In terms of intervention research, the focus is on how social and physical ecologies might nurture resilience.
Principle 2: Complexity	A social ecological conceptualisation of resilience emphasises that social and physical ecologies are complex, and that consequently, resilience-promoting processes are probably not linear, stable, or absolutely predictable. The focus, therefore, is on providing models that offer temporally/historically and contextually relevant explanations of resilience.
Principle 3: Atypicality	A social ecological conceptualisation of resilience emphasises that explanations of resilience will be context-dependent and may evidence atypical use of resources. This implies that there cannot be universally predetermined judgements of what positive adjustment might mean.
Principle 4: Cultural relativity	A social ecological conceptualisation of resilience emphasises that resilience-promoting processes are not culturally neutral, but embedded within the culture of a specific group of people; culture influences which processes are considered promotive and protective and how positive adjustment is conceptualised. This, in turn, urges attention to dominant versus marginalised cultural groups, cautioning against broad cultural explanations.

Table 4. A synthesis of options towards ethical resilience research

Caveat	Using Five Ms to respond ethically to caveat (see Table 2)	Using social ecology model to respond ethically to caveat (see Table 3)	Including an advisory panel (AP) to respond ethically to caveat
Youth blamed for vulnerability	Apply 1st , 4th, and 5th M	Apply Principle 1	Invite AP to co-analyse and communicate findings in ways that accentuate the role of social ecologies
Too little evidence-based practice	Apply 3rd and 5th M	Apply Principle 2	N/a
The costs of resilience	Apply 2nd and 3rd M (measure for costs too)	N/a	Invite AP to sensitise researchers to possible costs that they may have observed
Flawed measurements of resilience	Apply 3rd M	Apply Principle 3	N/a
Inadequate attention to cultural and contextual influences	Apply 1st and 5th M	Apply Principle 4	Invite AP to sensitise researchers to cultural and contextual influences on risk and resilience

CONCLUSION

I conclude by quoting Michael Rutter, considered by many to be one of the foremost pioneer resilience researchers: "We have yet to determine what works best for which individuals, what mechanisms mediate efficacy, and why some individuals fail to show a beneficial response. These issues remain a research challenge." (Rutter, 2012, p. 40). His words urge continued resilience research. Internationally, resilience research and publications on resilience are burgeoning (Masten, 2011). South Africa may not fall behind, even more so because the social ecologies in which our youth are growing up continue to be threatening (Reddy et al., 2010). The onus, therefore, is on us as psychologist-researchers to conduct this research in ways that address the caveats and advance ethical understandings of positive adjustment as a systemic phenomenon.

NOTES

1 The academic who reported these words to me asked to remain nameless.

2 For ethical reasons, it is not possible to divulge when and where I was privy to verbalised censure of resilience research with South African youth. Suffice it to say, in the period 2010–2012, I have had repeated experiences of such censure (at institutional and national body level), directed at my, and my students', resilience-focused research and grant proposals, as well as at those of South African peers at other higher education institutions.

3 This comment was included in the feedback I received from the NRF on my 2010 rating application. The feedback comprised comments made by individual reviewers, without making reviewer identity public.

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