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The relationship between working memory and psychological resilience

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Abstract

Working memory (WM) is an executive function that may promote resilience by enabling individuals to generate novel solutions in adverse situations. Research regarding the relationship between these constructs is limited. It is particularly unclear whether, and how, WM may promote resilience in the South African context. This study thus used a mixed method concurrent triangulation design to quantitatively investigate whether WM is related to resilience; and to qualitatively investigate how WM processes feature in participants' experiences of resilience, and how this is influenced by socio-cultural factors. Thirty-eight young Black South African adults from disadvantaged backgrounds (whose WM had been assessed in a pre-existing study) completed a demographic questionnaire and the Resilience Research Centre-Adult Resilience Measure in person or online. For the qualitative phase, 14 of these participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Quantitative findings were equivocal, but primarily non-significant. Qualitative findings indicated that WM processes featured in participants' accounts of resilience-promoting resources, but that this was shaped by socio-cultural resources accessible to participants. Working memory also featured as one amongst many of the resilience-promoting resources accessible to participants. The disparity between the quantitative and qualitative findings may be due to the individualistic nature of the quantitative WM measure used. Findings are interpreted in relation to existing literature regarding cognitive functioning and resilience. Implications for understanding and promoting the resilience of Black South African young adults are discussed.

Keywords: working memory, resilience, young adults, South Africa, mixed methods