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## Exploring upbringing styles of highly resilient students in South Africa: A mixed methods study

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Parents play a critical role in supporting the development of resilience in childhood and early adolescence. Most South Africans lack basic resources, so research into and commitment to resilience is of great importance. This study investigated the styles of parenting experienced by highly resilient South African students. Participants were 136 South African university students aged 18 to 23 (female = 44.9%, black = 66.9%). They completed the Child and Youth Resilience Measure. Further, six of the highest scoring students participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews on their retrospective parenting experiences. Quantitative analysis showed females had a higher mean resilience score than males. Qualitatively, thematic analysis identified the following parenting styles: loving caregiving, and behavioural control. Loving caregiving was expressed through accounts of encouragement, acceptance, and attentive regard. Behavioural control was demonstrated by verbal interactions of discipline, corporal punishment, and curfews. This implies a connection between specific parenting practices and high resilience in students, providing valuable insights for developing programs to boost children's resilience.

**Keywords:** behaviour management, Child and Youth Resilience Measure, family, parenting, positive adaptation, youth

### Introduction

Parents or caregivers play a critical role in the development and level of their children's resilience (Hill et al., 2007) by their parenting style or norms by which they raise their children (Becoña et al., 2012). Importantly, the role of parenting styles can play out both directly and indirectly. It plays a direct role in development by cultivating characteristics that aid children to cope with adversity (e.g., promoting healthy problem-solving skills) or by (indirectly) promoting the development of poor coping skills (e.g., by modelling a negative approach to dealing with one's problems such as using substances or ignoring the problem) (Cheraghian, Moradian & Nouri, 2023). In the South African context, Theron and van Rensburg (2020) argue that parental figures play a key role in adolescent resilience regardless of whether they are biological or social parents (i.e., someone who is responsible for raising a child despite not being a biological relative; see van den Berg & Mukasha, 2018). Promoting positive parenting would enhance children's wellbeing and address historical inequities (Pillay, 2023).

### Resilience qualities

Resilience refers to the ability to succeed, cope, or bounce back despite challenging circumstances (Kinard, 1998). Two key conditions of resilience are: (i) experiencing a significant threat or difficult circumstance; and (ii) positive adaption in response to this threat or circumstance (Luthar et al., 2000), which requires both tolerance and recovery (Hill et al., 2007). Importantly, resilience requires an individual to be active in their environment (i.e., it is not a passive

process) (Zakeri et al., 2010) and identifying predictors of this type of active engagement in one's environment. Simply stated, predictors of resilience have become a common focus of mental health literature.

### Style of upbringing

Styles of upbringing refers to the way parents raise their children, use norms, and exercise regulation of authority over their children (Becoña et al., 2012). Styles of upbringing, parenting, child rearing styles, and family types have all been used to refer to the same thing (i.e. the parental rearing of children) and are often used interchangeably.

Styles of upbringing were identified as protecting youth from externalising and internalising problem behaviours (Jugovac et al., 2022). Eriksson and colleagues (2010) found the following upbringing elements to be protective: good child caregiver and child relationship, authoritativeness, supportiveness, and monitoring (knowledge of children's activities). For instance, behavioural control is a type of caregiver control which also involves attempts to control and manage behaviour (Roman, 2014).

In a study that explored mental health resilience among parentally bereaved children in South Africa and Malawi, the caregiver characteristics (having a biological parent) were not associated with mental health resilience (Brokenleg, 2010). In line with this, there were highly resilient participants that were not raised by biological parents even in the small sample of individuals in this study.

In the South African cultural context, parental support for education was perceived by black South African adolescents as an indication of love (McNeely & Barber, 2010). In a review of several works, Hill and colleagues (2007) noted that warm, authoritative, responsive, and supportive parenting (i.e., loving upbringing) is vital in promoting prospective resilience in children and mediated coping responses to specific adversities.

### Goal of the study

The study aimed to investigate the styles of upbringing experienced by highly resilient students in South Africa. Research into and commitment to resilience is of great importance, as most South Africans lack basic resources including educational and therapeutic resources (Theron & Theron, 2010). Indeed, many low socioeconomic status South Africans can be said to face adversity daily. Therefore, exploring the experiences of the parenting received by highly resilient individuals will better equip society with the knowledge needed to develop resilient individuals. One such factor that can promote resilience is parenting styles (Hill et al., 2007). Therefore, our specific research question was: What parenting styles are experienced by highly resilient students.

### Method

#### Research design

We used a mixed methods design to study the styles of parenting experienced by highly resilient students. Mixed methods research uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to answer the research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Mixed methods was appropriate as we used the quantitative data to purposefully select participants for the qualitative phase of the study.

#### Participants and setting

In total, 136 students from a large South African university participated (female = 44.9%; black = 66.9%, Indian = 22.1%). To be included in the study participants needed to be aged 18-23 years old (see Table 1 for further details). In this sample half indicated that they were raised by women

only, this could reflect the contextual reality of South Africa, as women head 28.6% of nuclear households and 49.9% of extended family households (Ratele & Nduna, 2018). Furthermore, in African adolescent accounts of resilience, female parent-figures are prominent (e.g., Block, 2016; Zulu, 2018); this was also true for the black African participants in the sample of this study.

### Measures

The Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28; Liebenberg et al., 2012) comprises of 28 items to measure resilience factors that gauge the availability of individual, relational, communal, and cultural resources available to an individual (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). The measure was developed in 14 communities around the world by the Resilience Research Centre as part of the International Resilience Project (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “not at all to a lot”. Sample items include: “I have people I look up to”; “My parent(s)/caregiver(s) watch me closely”; “If I am hungry there is enough to eat”; “Spiritual beliefs are a source of strength for me”; “I know where to go in my community to get help”; “My family stands by me during difficult times”; and “I am aware of my own strengths”. In the present study, the reliability of scores from the CYRM-28 was 0.87.

### Interviews

Out of 136 participants that did the CYRM, semi-structured in-depth interviews were done with six of 20 high scoring participants on the CYRM-28, on their retrospective experiences of the parenting/upbringing they received. Peer debriefing and low inference descriptors (by using verbatim accounts) were utilised to enhance credibility and dependability, respectively.

### Procedure

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSS/0970/015M). Participants provided informed consent for participation where they were informed of the aims and objectives of the study, voluntariness of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were all conducted in English, recorded with consent, and transcribed.

### Data analysis

A ranking analysis was conducted with the quantitative CYRM-28 scores to determine which participants achieved the highest resiliency scores, so that the participants that illustrated the highest resiliency scores could be qualitatively interviewed. For the qualitative analysis, the transcribed interviews were analysed using framework analysis which is inductive and “allows for the inclusion of *a priori* as well as emergent concepts” (Lacey & Luff, 2001, p. 9). There are five key stages in framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002), and these were all implemented using the Microsoft Word® software. These five key stages are familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation. Common associations (or themes) in parenting styles

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of the sample

| Characteristic ( <i>n</i> = 136)     | <i>n</i> | %    |
|--------------------------------------|----------|------|
| Sex                                  |          |      |
| Male                                 | 73       | 53.7 |
| Female                               | 61       | 44.9 |
| Unknown                              | 2        | 1.5  |
| Racial group                         |          |      |
| Black                                | 91       | 66.9 |
| Indian                               | 30       | 22.1 |
| Mixed race                           | 7        | 5.2  |
| Other                                | 6        | 4.4  |
| Unknown                              | 2        | 1.5  |
| Highest education level <sup>a</sup> |          |      |
| Matric                               | 126      | 92.7 |
| Bachelor's degree                    | 4        | 2.9  |
| Unknown                              | 6        | 4.4  |

<sup>a</sup> Highest level of education completed

received by the participants with high scores of resilience were explored using the above noted stages of framework analysis.

## Findings and discussion

### CYRM-28 summary statistics

In the total sample that completed the CYRM-28 there were more males (73) than females (61). In a study done by Firoze and Sathar (2018) females scored higher than males using the Connor Davidson's Resilience Scale (CD-RISC: (Connor & Davidson, 2003), in a sample of 70 males and 70 females, which is a similar finding in the resilience scores of the present study. The same conclusion was reached by Sun and Stewart (2007) in their study of the effects of age and sex on resilience in adolescents. Table 2 presents the results from the CYRM-28.

### Thematic analysis findings

Common themes of parenting received by participants with high scores of resilience were loving caregiving (with sub-themes of love, encouragement, acceptance, and upbringing), and discipline or behavioural control (with the sub-theme of curfew).

#### Theme 1. Loving caregiving

This theme refers to a strong positive emotion of regard and affection. Encouraging betterment, support, and care, were not always directly linked to resilience by interviewed participants.

#### LOVE

Love is a pervasive characteristic of participants' upbringing, as suggested in the extract below:

*I:* Alright [pause] and obviously we can differentiate between care and love, would you say that you feel loved by your parents.

*P2:* Yes.

*I:* Okay, is there any aspect that you can think of off the top of your head that you haven't already spoken about, which makes you feel particularly loved by your parents?

*P2:* Um I think, that's so hard, it's not like big shows of affection, it's like small things they do that make you feel loved, so I can't pinpoint it to a specific thing they do, it's just like a daily basis thing that they create that environment, and that feeling of love.

#### ENCOURAGEMENT

Another sub-theme related to caregiver love is encouragement of betterment. This sub-theme refers to the caregivers reinforcing and supporting participants' advancement, development, and growth. Most of the sample reported that their caregiver's encouragement placed emphasis on education, for example:

*I:* In terms of the way you were brought up and how that might have contributed to you being resilient?

*P1:* Um, I think the one thing that was maintained is, as a girl in the modern world you have to work twice as hard, um to get anywhere, to build your reputation to build respect for you, so that has always been enforced.

**Table 2.** CYRM-28 Resilience Scores

| Total resilience score                  | Statistic |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------|
| Mean                                    | 148.97    |
| 95% confidence interval for lower bound | 145.94    |
| 95% confidence interval for upper bound | 152.00    |
| 5% trimmed mean                         | 149.44    |
| Median                                  | 150.00    |
| Variance                                | 314.059   |
| Standard deviation                      | 17.722    |
| Minimum                                 | 97        |
| Maximum                                 | 185       |
| Range                                   | 88        |
| Interquartile range                     | 26        |

*I:* Okay, and you would say that that is probably one of the main contributors?

*P1:* Ja, definitely.

*I:* Alright, are there any others that you can think of.

*P1:* Um [pause] this thing about where, you need to study and you need to leave, you need to go somewhere where there's better opportunities, there's um [pause] as you can see education was a big factor, but it's always where you need to be better than those before you, you need to be better than your parents, you need to have more, you need to do more, you need to be more relaxed, things like that.

#### ACCEPTANCE

This sub-theme refers to the subjective feelings of receiving comfort, and/or assistance by the caregiver(s) to their children during challenges or times of adversity. Support is an omnipresent characteristic described in the upbringing received by the sample, the following extract is one example:

*I:* And anything in relation to perhaps the way you were parented that you haven't already mentioned that has contributed to your resiliency?

*P5:* Not – nothing that I haven't mentioned, I don't think because it's just been obviously seeing them move on and pick themselves up and then always being there to tell me you can do it. You can move forward, there was a time where I wasn't sure I would walk, and my mum and dad were like you will, you can't right now but you will, and I think it's those things, sorry it's still a sore topic (teary eyed).

*I:* No of course.

*P5:* But ja, they were – they were there.

Another participant highlighted her parents' supervision, as follows:

*I:* Mm, alright, finally before we conclude is there anything else you would like to add that you might think is important?

*P6:* Um [pause] to parenting or?

*I:* Ja, to parenting, or to what contributed to you being so highly resilient?

P6: Um I think they were there when I needed them and they didn't – they weren't too, like, controlling, they didn't make sure they were supervising everything, so they gave me my space, but they also made sure that I was on the right track. So, I think if, parents let, like they let their kids do what they want, but, like, they keep it under control, like it's not too – like you're not embarrassing your family or anything. Then I think they kind of get that idea that we're having that freedom, but we still have to be respectful. Ja [laughs].

This practice of providing support through an adequate level of monitoring and without being intrusively controlling, was perceived as contributing to resilience. This participant intimated that this created healthy boundaries, which are fundamental to developing independence (Ignatius, 2021).

### *Upbringing*

Caring upbringing refers to the subjective feelings of help, protection, and/or supervision from caregivers. Attentive regard by the caregivers embodies this sub-theme as seen in the extract below:

I: Okay, and would you say then that your parents make you feel cared for?

P5: Yes, they do. I do feel cared for. It's just knowing that they're there, and there are people who do actually care if you wake up tomorrow, and there are people who do care if you've eaten today, if you're okay, if you've had a good day, if you're day was not good why wasn't it good, and how can they make it better it's just. I don't think there has ever been a time when my parents have seen me cry and they just left me. Even as much as a teenager you would like to say leave me alone, I never had that. They wouldn't leave me until I was okay. So for me I felt, I still do feel cared for, and I am I would say a bit annoying, not me personally but with my issues, and I've given them a whole lot to stress about, and yet they're always there worrying about me. Always enquiring about how I am and, ja.

It can be said that this participant expressed the care she felt that she received from her parents as concern from her parents regarding her health, sustenance, and emotional well-being. In addition, the subjective feeling of care reported by the participant also seems to be present due to the availability of her parents to be there for her, their attempts to assist her, and their interest expressed in their enquiries of her.

Similarly, the participant in the following extract can be seen to have subjective feelings of being cared for by her parents:

P6: Ja, I actually feel really cared for, ja.

I: Alright, in what ways?

P6: Um, like [pause] they make sure I'm okay in general, they check if my studies are going well, if I need anything then they, they can like get it for me. Um, and ja I feel – ja they do show they care in everything they do they just make sure you know that we're happy so, ja.

All interviewed participants reported feeling cared for by their caregiver(s), therefore this is a universal characteristic in the upbringing received by the interviewed sample. This finding is consistent with that by Maximo and Carranza

(2016) who reported parental service to provide the practical resources needed to build resilience in young adults. A study by Eriksson and colleagues (2010) also reported good caregiver child relationships, authoritative parents, supportive parents, and parental monitoring (i.e., caring upbringing), to enhance youth resilience.

### *Theme 2. Discipline/behavioural control*

A somewhat different caring upbringing topic was discipline or behavioural control. This theme refers to caregivers directing and/or restraining the behaviour of the participants. Behavioural control was not a style of upbringing directly linked to resilience by the participants. Nonetheless, it was a common theme reported by this highly resilient sample. Some examples of behavioural control in upbringing can be seen in the interview extracts below:

I: Okay, alright, and you're talking about the strictness of obviously your mother and grandmother, so you grandmother is the strict one, would you consider her controlling?

P3: Ja.

I: Okay, how would she implement that?

P3: Well, she [pause] it was mainly through just talking. Just telling me what to do, in terms of – well if I did something wrong, she would tell why [sic] that was wrong and how I should carry myself next time or stuff like that. So, it was mainly through just talking, and expressing disapproval with what I did, and ja things I was expected to do, and things I shouldn't do, as a Christian and ja, things like that ja.

In the above extract the participant explained having experienced discipline through verbal interactions and the expression of disapproval from her parental figure (because of incorrect conduct), based on religious beliefs. Behavioural control is also described by participant four in the following extract:

I: Mm hmm, and your grandmother (referring to whether she was controlling).

P4: My grandmother: controlling.

I: Okay.

P4: [Giggles] Ja she controls like curfew – as I told you we have rules at home, there are ground rules, there's stuff that I shouldn't do, ja, ever since like, I started becoming a teenager she told me, "This and that are the rules just know that I won't repeat them again", ja.

I: Okay, what sort of rules?

P4: A lot of rules was curfew [sic], of course, and always be respectful, and don't talk back to your elders, um and [pause] once you're eighteen and above, you're allowed to have a boyfriend.

I: [Giggles]

P4: [Giggles] Yes, rules were like [inaudible for one second]

I: Okay, what would happen if you had to break one of them?

P4: If I had to break one of them, I'd get [makes hiding gesture] ja she would hit me.

I: Mm.

P4: Ja.

Unlike participant three, behavioural control was enforced with corporal punishment for participant four. This would occur if one of the rules (such as the curfew) were broken.

#### CURFEW

One mechanism in which parents enacted behavioural control was through curfews. Four out of the six participants reported having a caregiver enforce curfew. This was an unexpected finding that was discussed by participants without any direct prompting of the interviewer. This sub-theme refers to a rule set by a caregiver that specifies the time a child must be back home after going out. Examples of these reports are provided below:

I: Okay, alright, um what sort of rules?

P1: Um well, like my curfew is still nine o'clock.

I: Okay alright.

P1: Um [pause] I don't really go anywhere, normally just go out with a group of girlfriends mostly.

I: And the strictness that was there; what sort of things would that strictness be around?

P6: Um well it would be like curfew, I couldn't come home too late at night when I had been out with my friends, um [pause]...

In a search of the literature, no direct link between curfews and resilience were found. Therefore, the curfew being noted as a theme in this highly resilient sample is a novel finding. Whether a curfew is deemed acceptable depends on the cultural context (Lansford, 2022). In a nationwide study of 11 904 South African youth aged 15 to 24, females with a curfew were 46% less likely to consume alcohol, compared with those who did not have a curfew. Females with family supervision, such as a curfew, were also less likely to have used drugs (Meghdadpour et al., 2012).

#### Limitations and future recommendations

A limitation in the representativeness of the sample that participated in the semi-structured interviews is that there were no male participants. However, it is important to be mindful that this sample is the result of the purposive sampling method being followed to recruit highly resilient participants.

Future research should include the identification of:

- (i) important constructs and measures related to parenting promoting resiliency among different populations;
- (ii) important gaps in research regarding the ways that styles of parenting and parent-child interactions affect outcomes in children in socially, ethnically, and culturally diverse groups; and
- (iii) constrictions that cause disparities in the access and use of resources that support parenting across cultural groups and contribute to low resiliency in children.

Styles of upbringing were linked to positive outcomes in children from around the world in previous research (Awiszus et al., 2022; Pali et al., 2022; Stavroulaki et al., 2021). Furthermore, the need for children to receive certain parenting provisions is important across varied parent groups. An additional finding that emerged was the common theme of a curfew amongst this highly resilient sample. Future studies should investigate effective curfew

as an element of caregiver monitoring for high resiliency in emerging adulthood.

#### Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore the styles of parenting that are experienced by highly resilient students. The findings suggest that subjective feelings of love, help, protection, acceptance, encouragement, and/or supervision from caregiver(s) were common themes amongst the participants. Other common themes included discipline or behavioural control. Curfew was a cultural method of behavioural control commonly experienced in this highly resilient sample. The study's findings therefore suggest that certain parenting practices are associated with highly resilient students. The evidence from this study can inform the development of parenting programmes aimed at enhancing resilience in children. These programmes could provide guidance on fostering a nurturing environment, implementing effective discipline, and promoting positive communication.

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#### Data availability and sharing statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, FM, upon reasonable request.

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