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To cite this article: Vera Roos (2024) Understanding Adaptive Competencies of a Woman in Her 80s: Toward the Development of Therapeutic Guidelines, *Women & Therapy*, 47:4, 395-413, DOI: [10.1080/02703149.2024.2390307](https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2024.2390307)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2024.2390307>



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Published online: 23 Sep 2024.



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Understanding Adaptive Competencies of a Woman in Her 80s: Toward the Development of Therapeutic Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the adaptive competencies of an older woman who lived well into her 80s in deprived environments, to serve as a basis for developing therapeutic guidelines for older individuals in contexts of adversities. This retrospective, instrumental case study draws on the theoretical lens offered by the person-environment-fit (PEF) framework in the context of adaptive aging. Multiple data sources (Mmogo-method¹—a visual projective technique—interviews and extant texts) yielded textual and visual data which were analyzed to present a case record and relevant themes. Personal competencies that enabled this woman's adaptation were industriousness, courageous and generous caring, and agency. Four types of relationships and associated competencies emerged: ancestral heritage (being rooted), peer group (mobilizing resources), intergenerational (being concerned for continuity), and spiritual (having a commitment script). Therapeutic guidelines for older women include: using a life story approach to identify the nature (flexible/rigid) of the environments and older women's adaptive competencies; assessing the different environments (e.g. physical, relational) to determine the focus of intervention; challenging unfair social practices; and supporting older women's agency and active participation to adapt to 'unfit' environments while also being aware of what additional complementary support/protection older women would need to embrace adaptive aging.

KEYWORDS

Adverse environments; competencies; older women; adaptive aging; effective relationships

Introduction

Worldwide, it is expected that there will be an unprecedented increase in the number of older individuals (WHO, 2022), thereby enlarging the potential pool of those seeking therapy. For the most part, literature on therapy for older clients is approached from a mental health perspective whereby therapists as the experts diagnose, assess, and collect information to decide

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on an appropriate treatment plan for individual clients (Bozarth, 2012). Yet few older clients in a developing world context, such as South Africa, are in a position to benefit from this approach to therapy. The exploration of alternatives to support older clients' adaptation in a range of environments (for example, social, cultural or physical) in which they function—and by drawing on the person-environment-fit (PEF) model—is therefore proposed.

This article uses the findings from a retrospective, instrumental case study of an older Black woman to understand how she adapted well into her 80s to environments which could be described as severely deprived and challenging. First, the lives of older Black women in South Africa are contextualized to set the scene for introducing the case of the late Ma Malebone Susan Luthuli² (her request to be named). The PEF framework is used to identify the competencies that enabled Ma Luthuli's adaptations in different environments and relationships throughout her life. The article concludes with a brief overview of the literature on therapy for older clients and a set of therapeutic guidelines to support older women's adaptive aging in similarly adverse settings and also more broadly.

Contextualizing Older Black South African Women

Older Black women in their 80s form part of a cohort still suffering from the accumulative effects of the now dismantled discriminatory and socially disruptive apartheid system, whereby the South African government in the late 1950s forcibly relocated over three million people non-White people to the remote fringes of society (see Kentridge, 2013; Mesthrie, 1993; Turton & Chalmers, 1990). Under the apartheid system, Black people had been subjected to grossly unequal educational opportunities (McKeever, 2017), thus damaging their possibilities of obtaining a proper education and decent work. Consequently, today many older Black people are still confronted with severe environmental deprivation, observable in the limited or lacking health services, disrupted (intergenerational) relationships, and the stark reality of entrenched poverty (Hoffman, 2022).

One of the strategies to mitigate the socio-economic implications associated with poverty among older South Africans, is the means-tested Old Age Pension (OAP) (currently at approximately ZAR2190/USD120 per month for people 60 years and older, ZAR 2,210 (USD121) for those 75 years and older), which older women mostly use to support households consisting of multigenerational members, orphaned children, or abandoned older persons (Hoffman, 2022). It is against this dire background that the remarkable life of Ma Luthuli caught attention, begging the question: What can we learn from an older Black woman who experienced extreme environmental deprivation throughout her life, and who not only managed to adapt to the environment, but also cared about and actively pursued the

wellbeing of others? This led to the adoption of a theoretical framework which takes people and their fit with different environments into account.

Theoretical Framework: Person-Environment Fit and Adaptive Aging

The person-environment-fit (PEF) model draws on the age-friendly approach, proposed by the World Health Organization (2007); the *P* in the model refers to people's competencies, and the *E* to environmental factors or demands (see Keating et al., 2013). The *F* (fit) assumes the flexible adaptation both of the individual and the environment. On the one hand, complementary or supporting physical and social environments enable older individuals' adaptations and their abilities to select, optimize, and compensate (see Baltes & Smith, 2003). If there is a good fit, according to the theory, conducive outcomes for individuals will follow (see Keating et al., 2013). But if there is a misfit between the environment and the individual, adaptation may be at risk. The emphasis is on the potential both of the environment and of the individual to flexibly accommodate in order to support adaptive aging across the life course. Following is a single, retrospective case study research design to focus on the adaptive aging of an older woman in severely deprived (adverse) environments, and on her navigation of the social environment to promote the wellbeing of others.

Narrative Case Description: The Late Ma Malebone Susan Luthuli – “My Road in Life/My Life in the Road”

We first met Ma Luthuli in 2007 when she was 72 years old, in the course of a research project on older Black persons' experiences of loneliness at the Ikageng Old Age Center situated in the large town of Ikageng close to Potchefstroom, in the North West Province of South Africa. She had been identified by community members as a key informant, who acted as gatekeeper to a group of older women at the old age center. We explained the purpose of the research and assured Ma Luthuli that we would protect her information and personal identity. However, she asked us specifically to include her name in the case record because she embraced her life with pride, and accordingly we honor her legacy by using her name here. The use of a participant's name, in this instance, draws on the ethics of giving a voice to the marginalized (see Segalo & Molobela, 2019). In asking Ma Luthuli to propose a possible title for her life journey, she suggested: *My Road in Life/My Life in the Road*.

Ma Luthuli was born on 10 November 1935 on a rural farm in South Africa and described her background as “very, very, very bad.” She cared for her blind mother, who suffered from asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure and, at the end of her life, also cognitive degenerative disease.

Ma Luthuli also cared for her father, until he died from cancer. At the age of 14, Ma Luthuli left school and went out to work to support her family. In her earlier years, she held several jobs as an unskilled worker as a tea lady and cleaner. Ma Luthuli married and gave birth to 11 children, although by 2011, only five of her children were still alive. At the age of 52, in 1987, Ma Luthuli took a course on caring for young children and started her own nursery school, focusing on less-privileged children.

In 1994, Ma Luthuli suffered a life-threatening illness with a poor prognosis but drawing on her spirituality and support from her faith-based community, she recovered fully. In 1999, with the prompting and encouragement of the church elders' wives, Ma Luthuli established the Ikageng Old Age Center, with the help of nine other older women. Ma Luthuli approached the local municipality for permission to use an abandoned building to house the day care center but was turned down several times. She then asked the local police commissioner if she could use a building on police premises, which he permitted on condition that the older women renovated it. The building had no windows or doors, but Ma Luthuli systematically set about obtaining donations and building materials to make the place habitable.

A typical day in Ma Luthuli's life usually started at 7:30am, when she arrived at the center. At about 8:00am, the other 15 older women (at that stage) who helped her with community outreach activities arrived. They started by doing exercises, praying together, and reading the Bible before having breakfast. After the meal, everybody set off to visit frail older persons in the community, except two women who were busy with catering and housekeeping duties.

Ma Luthuli was awarded the Order of the Baobab in Silver, South Africa's highest national civic honor, for her commitment to servicing the community and for championing the cause of vulnerable children. One of her achievements was founding the GogoGetting programme through which she encouraged grandparents to support orphaned children. She also won the Community Builder Award of the North West Province and a Certificate of Recognition for running the Ikageng Old Age Center without any funding from government. Ma Luthuli passed away on February 24, 2022.

Research Methodology

Single case study research involves an in-depth understanding of an individual's life within a specific socio-cultural context as a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research design is suitable here because it uses context-dependent, practical knowledge to develop transferable knowledge (the extent to which the findings could be transferred to other contexts, drawing on Roller and Lavrakas (2015) and, in this instance, to suggest therapeutic guidelines to support older women's adaptive aging in

adverse environments and in their relationships. This single retrospective case study draws on multiple sources of information, which is reported as a case description and case themes (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Multiple Sources of Information

Case study designs use multiple data-gathering methods to obtain comprehensive, systematic and in-depth information, which covers the nature of the case, its historical background and physical setting, as well as other methods (for example, documents) by means of which the case may be explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We collected data from different sources over a period of four years. Multiple sources for this purpose included data obtained from the Mmogo-method[®]—a projective visual data-collection method (see Roos, 2016), interviews, and extant texts reporting on the awards Ma Luthuli had received. The Mmogo-method is participant-centred and takes place in a group setting, thereby disrupting the power dynamics inherent in the individual participant-researcher-relationship. The different interviews took place organically as part of a close, trusting relationship that developed between the researchers and Ma Luthuli in her initial role as a key informant. In the interviews, Ma Luthuli adopted the role of ‘life coach’ when she shared her life story, while the researchers adopted a one-down position, listening attentively and asking clarifying questions.

The Mmogo-Method

The Mmogo-method is usually applied in four phases. In Phase 1, researchers create a safe interpersonal context by introducing norms that would guide behavior during data collection, making clear what would be expected of participants, and distributing the research materials (malleable clay, dried grass stalks, and different sizes of colorful beads). Phase 2 begins when researchers ask participants to use the materials to create visual representations based on an open-ended prompt, in this instance: “Make a visual presentation of places that are important to you and your community.” In Phase 3, researchers ask a volunteer to initiate an explanation of what they had constructed and involve the group in the discussion to obtain individuals’ as well as the group’s views on the topic. The process is repeated until all participants have had an opportunity to talk about what they had made, and the researcher has formed a clear understanding of the symbolic and literal meanings of the visual images. The Mmogo-method is concluded in Phase 4, when researchers engage individually with participants to deal with any emotional content the process might have elicited. This is referred to as debriefing when researchers in their turn also reflect on their experiences of the process. Ma Luthuli’s visual representations and her explanation were recorded and transcribed as one of the data sources for the case study.

Interviews

Three different interviews were conducted by three different researchers, with three different research questions. As three White women researchers³ involved in the collection of data for various research purposes, we acknowledged the differences between us and Ma Luthuli; younger and privileged and from a university context. We (reflexively) adopted an empathic position from the point of view of the participant, not the researchers' (see Roller, 2020; Vorster et al., 2013). In the course of our engagement, we developed a deeply personal relationship with Ma Luthuli and we acknowledge that our admiration for her could bias our presentation of findings. The first interview used the Mmogo-method findings to obtain deeper insights into Ma Luthuli's relationship with the physical environment to which she had been forcibly relocated in her younger years, places of importance, and reasons why they were significant. We employed in-the-moment reflection (Roller, 2020), when we listened attentively to what Ma Luthuli said and reflected this understanding through authentic verbalisations to check the accuracy of the meaning she had shared (see Cavé et al., 2024). In the second interview we obtained Ma Luthuli's life story, using a narrative approach, and the third interview served to obtain information about her daily life at the Ikageng Old Age Center. In the last two interviews, we adopted a non-directional and open reflective approach (Roller, 2020) to allow Ma Luthuli to share the information in whatever sequence she preferred. Clarifying questions were asked to ensure a comprehensive account.

Extant Text

Newspaper articles described Ma Luthuli's community involvement and the awards she received for communal upliftment projects. The article, from the *Noordwes Gazette* (June, 2010), described how she had been awarded the silver Order of the Boabab. A newspaper article in the *Potchefstroom Herald* (October 22, 2010) reported on her heroic acts of care for an older woman who had been abandoned by her family. An article published in the *Potchefstroom Herald* (September 17, 2012) reported her nomination for the Acts of Love project, whereby awareness is raised about unconditional service to the community.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Framework analysis as proposed by Gale et al. (2013) was used to analyze the different sources of data. In Stage 1, all interview data were transcribed and bound with the extant texts. Stage 2 involved familiarization with the complete dataset, and in Stage 3, the researcher conducted a line-by-line

reading and applied a relevant code, such as deprived childhood environment. In Stage 4, an analytical framework was developed and applied to analyzing the rest of the data sources in Stage 5. Stage 6 involved charting the data into the framework. Visual data were analyzed using a conceptual model developed by Baart and Roos (2022), named created-image data analysis (CIDA), in five phases. Phase 1 presents basic information about the visual representation; Phase 2 examines the elements and organization of the visual data; Phase 3 analyses the logic or cohesion of the data; Phase 4 interprets meaning; and Phase 5 evaluates the possible explanations. Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured by applying crystallization and prolonged engagement and by looking for negative examples of the case themes in the data. Crystallization consisted of obtaining different perspectives on the data by involving multiple researchers and data sources (Ellingson, 2009; Tracy, 2010). Data were collected over a period of four years, enabling a prolonged engagement (see Morse, 2015) and an even a longer period analyzing and making sense of the data. Negative examples (outliers) in the data were used to contradict the prevailing interpretation, as suggested by Roller and Lavrakas (2015).

Case Themes

Case themes are presented in Figure 1, followed by a discussion. The first focus is on unfavorable physical and structural environments, identifying both the factors associated with risks for individual adaption and the competencies Ma Luthuli applied to enable her adaptation to these environments. The second focus is on relationships and the competencies enabling self and other people's adaptation. A person's life and adaptive competencies to different environments are complex, and therefore the grouping of a specific environment or relationship with associated competencies does not assume causality, but rather a possibility. The case themes are supported with data from one of the multiple data sources.

Physical, Caring and Structural Environments and Adaptive Competencies

Ma Luthuli's environments encompass resource-deprived physical environments, deprived caring environment, and socio-political abandonment, which is discussed next.

Resource-Deprived Physical Environments: Industriousness as an Adaptive Competency

The physical and structural environments across Ma Luthuli's life included limited financial and basic food resources. She described her background

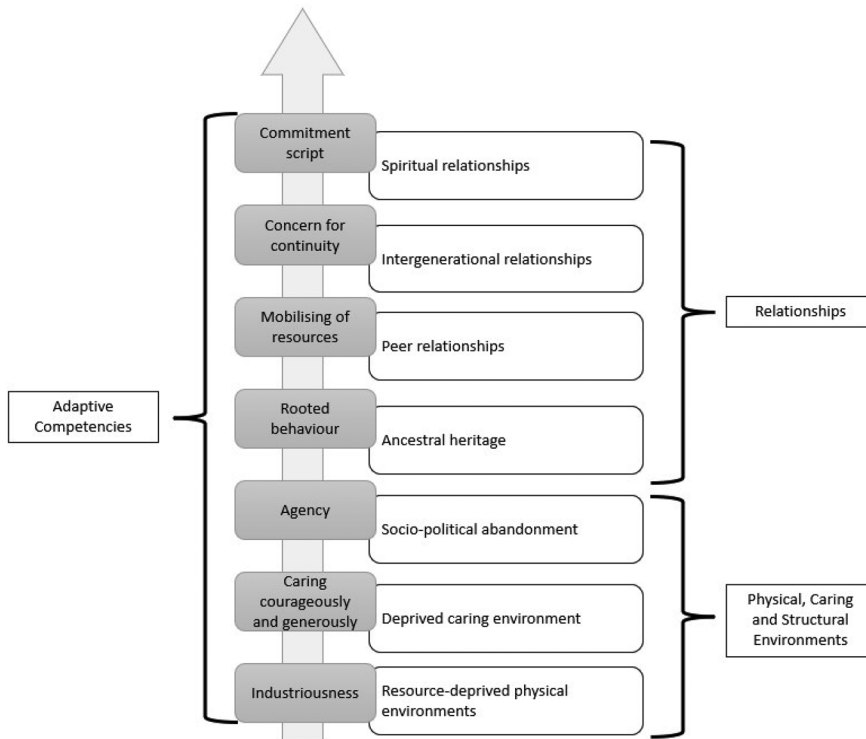


Figure 1. Visual presentation of different environments and possible adaptive competencies.

as very, very poor. “My dad took us out of school (at age 14 for Ma Luthuli) for us to help bring food to the house. I gave the R6 [less than \$1] I earned a month to my father to buy food.” In her adult life she supported her family of 13 people (11 children, herself, and her husband) with her meager income from low-paying jobs for unskilled workers. Until her death Ma Luthuli lived in a small dwelling (“I do not live in a fancy house”), dependent on a modest social state-funded grant.

Deprived environments like these are rigid, placing a heaving demand on people’s competencies to adapt. The lack of, or very limited, financial resources in physical environments throughout Ma Luthuli’s life activated her industriousness, which manifested itself in taking jobs to earn even a modest income.

A golden thread that runs through Ma Luthuli’s life was the importance and central role of work. At first her industriousness was necessary to support her family of origin, when she and her siblings took care of farm work. “I had to look after the livestock. My sisters and I had to go out before the break of dawn. We had to milk the cows in the mornings before we went to school.” Later in her life, the theme of hard work continued as she supported the family. “I have never been without work. Work was work to me even if the salary was very poor.”

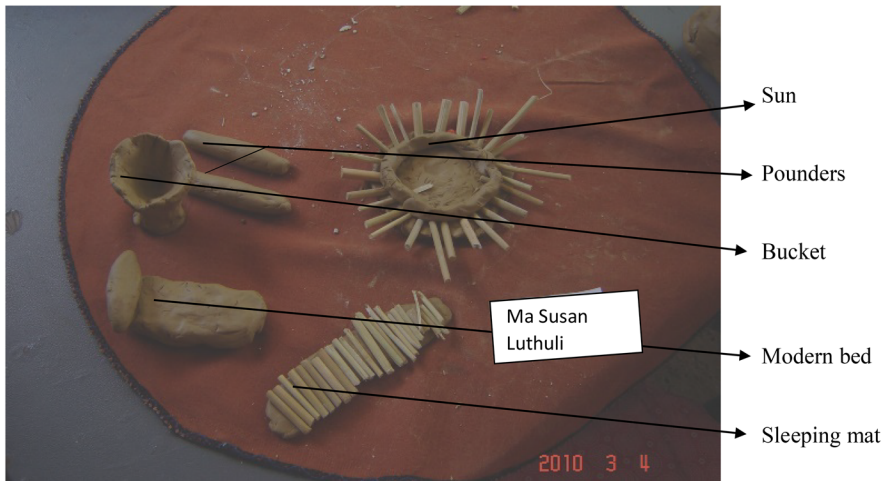


Figure 2. Visual representation constructed as part of the Mmogo-method.

Being industrious was accompanied by a sense of pride and agency, qualities that support flexible adaptation: “I do not believe in receiving handouts, I work for my own crumbs. I am not saying that I will not accept anything from anyone, but I will rather do things myself.”

In the visual images obtained from the Mmogo-method (Figure 2), where participants were asked to make anything related to places of importance, Ma Luthuli opted for a humble presentation depicting a physical childhood environment which reminded her of working hard, resting only to work hard again: two utensils (pounders or mortars) to manually grind flour from wheat and corn in the bucket, two beds to sleep on (a traditional sleeping mat and a modern bed), and the sun. Ma Luthuli made these images because she missed the farm with its fresh milk and maize flour produced by pounding the wheat and corn.

The sun, the biggest visual element in the center, has two meanings. First, its rhythm determines when a working day begins and ends. Second, the sun represents praise to God.

Deprived Caring Environment: Caring Courageously and Generously as an Adaptive Competency

In care-deprived environments, Ma Luthuli became a courageous and generous caregiver. First, she looked after her own parents, then cared for her own family and, in addition, for vulnerable (older and younger) people in the broader community. Ma Luthuli described the environment in which she grew up as terrible, with both parents “very strict and angry,” and a rigid household routine. The only caring behavior she mentioned in relation to her parents was her mother’s sharing of food with other children in the neighborhood. “My mother used to call children in from the street and

then she would give all of them food and drinking water.” Later in her life, Ma Luthuli became aware of the plight of marginalized and neglected younger and older people and responded by becoming a caregiver. She courageously accepted that role, rising to the occasion, irrespective of how dire it was. Caring for Ma Luthuli included sharing any financial resources that came to her and providing emotional support by listening.

Financial resources, according to Ma Luthuli, were there to share. The media reported that Ma Luthuli performed community work with passion regardless of payment. “Everything I do, I share, I don’t just keep it to myself.” She shared her pension with the older persons, the children, and the sick people. She even shared the money she had received as part of the Baobab award. “When I win money, that money is not mine. I only won because I wanted to help the old people and the orphans.”

Ma Luthuli demonstrated care not only by giving money to worthwhile causes, but also by expressing emotional care. One of the newspaper articles reported her saying: “The best medicine for them [older persons] is a bit of compassion, respect and a sense of belonging.” When asked how she took care of people, she said: “I listen. You have to sit and talk to the person and be patient. Do not cut it short for someone who wants to release all her feelings onto you. Only then [after listening] you decide what is important for this person. What does this person need?”

Great was my shock when I came upon a very sickly old lady in a squatter home [house with metal corrugated iron walls]. My heart went out to her and I offered to care for her. I bathed her, rubbed petroleum jelly into her body, dressed her in my nightgown and fed her thin porridge and soup from a flask.

Socio-Political Abandonment: Agency as an Adaptive Competency

After being forcibly relocated, Black people in South Africa had to manage their lives in deprived environments. The socio-political events of the late 1950s disrupted the majority of Black South African’s lives brutally and irrevocably: they had to adjust to unfamiliar places in remote areas with poor infrastructure. In 1994, the first democratically elected South African government legislated for distributive power whereby local government as the most accessible form of government could impact the quality of people’s lives directly. However, the socio-political abandonment of Black people in their younger years repeated itself in their older years as an unresponsive local government failed to address the needs of older persons appropriately (see Roos et al., 2022). This contributed to a sense of learned helplessness among some older individuals, expressed by Ma Luthuli as follows:

We do not know where to complain anymore. We do not know, even if they call us together for a meeting, we do not go anymore. We do not go, because it is just

complaining and none of the important topics is discussed. Roads that need to be fixed, lights, schools.

It is against this background that Ma Luthuli demonstrated agency and leadership by actively searching for and finding a building to house the older persons and to feed orphaned and street children. A police commissioner agreed that Ma Luthuli and the other older persons could use a dilapidated, state-owned building behind the police station in Ikageng after several failed attempts to obtain permission from the local government to use other abandoned buildings. She further demonstrated agency through her success in raising funds to renovate the building.

[He] gave us this place, because we wanted to use it for the elders, on one condition: that we fix it ourselves. The place had no windows and no door. Can you believe it? We fixed everything ourselves with the help of the elders. We raised funds, we begged and so forth.

Ma Luthuli was concerned about the lack of paving around the house and the risk that the older persons could slip, particularly in wet weather. “We tried to lay a paving outside. You are going to ask me why. I do not want the elders to stumble and fall. I do not ask for money, because what I need is a paving.” She asked a local businessman for materials and motivated younger people in the community to help with laying the paving around the house. Ma Luthuli had a clear idea of what she needed to support her sense of agency.

Relationships: The Context for Adaptive Competencies

Ma Luthuli’s relationships include ancestral heritage, peer group, intergenerational, and spirituality.

Ancestral Heritage: The Context for Rooted Behavior as an Adaptive Competency

People are born with an ancestral heritage, which confirms their rootedness and sense of belonging and, from that, character, according to Ma Luthuli. Knowing where you are coming from is important, Ma Luthuli points out, because “you can get your roots, know who your people are. That you are not alone and just here or feeling that you are not needed.” Ancestors are important because, from the historical lineage, people are predisposed to a certain character which informs behavior—good or bad. “You cannot be a person on earth and don’t know where you come from.” The importance of knowing your ancestral heritage was explained by Ma Luthuli in the context of her husband, who had been orphaned in infancy. She went to great lengths to trace his origins, visiting a neighboring country when she learned that it was her husband’s birthplace, located a priest, and obtained

information about his parents, brothers and sisters, the broader family (uncles, aunts), grandparents, and great- grandparents.

Ma Luthuli described the profound influence of non-living ancestors. “Although you cannot see them with your physical eyes, deep down you have to know that these are your people and that you have to honour them until you die.”

Peer Relationships: The Context for Mobilizing Resources as an Adaptive Competency

Ma Luthuli's relationships with her peers provided her with physical assistance and income by collecting funds or making donations from their pensions, which led to the renovation of the building and to the growing of seasonal vegetables. The renovated Ikageng Old Age Center became a base for older persons in the community to attend, and from where to go out to visit bed-ridden older persons in the community. They shared financial resources and drew on them as a collective resource to support their own needs and those of other vulnerable people. “We have to share and take each other's hands.” The pensioners donated some of their pension money, which they used to grow seasonal vegetables for the kitchen for their own meals and sold the surplus to get an income for the center. They also bought wool and fabric, which they used to make clothing and blankets, which they also sold. “The profits were used for a bicycle and food, as well as toiletries for the needy.” Ma Luthuli actively sought older persons to share with her the task of caring for vulnerable people. “She did a door-to-door campaign and enlisted 50 pensioners. They went into the neighbourhood in smaller groups of four to five to look for sick and helpless people to offer their services,” according to one of the newspapers. Some older persons received training from Ma Luthuli on running a care center for the aged and subsequently opened their own centers. “I am glad for everyone that leaves here. I give training and direction and then they can open their own [centre].”

However, Ma Luthuli sometimes experienced frustration with her fellow workers, who did not use their initiative, but waited for her direction. “Some days I get very angry when the older persons didn't cook. I don't want them just to sit around. They have to prepare the food, even if I am not here.” The number of older women who were participating also decreased until it was only Ma Luthuli who was left. “We were nine people when we started this place, eventually everybody quit, except for me.”

Intergenerational Relationships: The Context for Concern for Continuity as an Adaptive Competency

Ma Luthuli stressed the importance of relationships with younger related and unrelated people as well as her concern for continuity across

generations. Younger children, according to Ma Luthuli, are the future and how one engages with them is important. “Children are very, very important to me because they are the future.” The focus on intergenerational relationships and educating the next generation so that they know how to behave was a concern for Ma Luthuli: “What will happen if all of us are gone, and the children were not educated properly?” Older people (related or unrelated) had responsibility for educating children to become human beings who knew how to behave. “We have to raise these children and teach them what it means to be a person who acts through love and helps others.” Children learned from observing behavior which meant that older persons had a responsibility to model their own behavior. “We competed in dancing with the children in Durban [more or less 800 km from where Ma Luthuli lived]. We participated with the children so that they can see that even at my age I can still make fancy turns so they have to do it with us.” Older persons should also engage respectfully with children, which meant that they should be treated with patience. “You should not hit a child even if she hits you. Take her by the hand and bring her closer to you and say: listen we are not going to hit each other. We are important in this life. We have to have less violence.”

Spiritual Relationships: The Context for Commitment Script as an Adaptive Competency

Ma Luthuli’s spiritual relationships manifested on two levels: the faith-based community to which she belonged, and her personal relationship with God. Both informed her commitment script and inspired her to take action. A commitment script captures a host of relational dynamics (see Hoplock et al., 2019), and in this instance it is about sensitivity for the suffering and needs of other people, informing social behavior. The women of the faith-based community were influential as they encouraged Ma Luthuli to start a center for older individuals. “You’ve got education. You’ve got knowledge. You cannot just sit with everything. What about getting together some older people?” On a personal level, Ma Luthuli practised her spiritual relationship actively.

I am a religious person, because I have my own faith in my own manner. It remains standing, even if everything else falls away. You can stand and pray in a corner or under a tree. You can speak with the Lord anywhere you are.

Ma Luthuli’s strong conviction that God had a plan for her life moved her to doing good to others: “God wants me to do something on earth. God gives me everything to help other people. God provides new strength and new thoughts to continue the work I am doing.”

A recurrent theme across all data sets was Ma Luthuli’s sensitivity to the needs of others and help for the poorest of the poor and other

vulnerable people. She emphasized: “What makes me proud is when I can help someone that was rejected by everyone else.” When asked in one of the interviews who it was she was helping, she said:

Everyone! I take children, I take the elderly, I don’t care. And what makes me proud is when I get someone which has been abandoned and people say: “I am not going in there.” I will go in.

Ma Luthuli helped other people by obeying her calling and for her own satisfaction. “It strengthens me. I feel like a brand-new person who was just born.”

Discussion of Findings

Drawing on the person-environment fit framework, generally adverse environments often lack adequate resources and the flexibility to enable individuals’ adaptation (Keating et al., 2013). In this specific case of rigid environments, the onus falls for the most part on individuals to develop competencies to navigate their adaptation to (unfit) environments. In this case study, four types of relationships emerged in relation to adaptive competencies, namely: relationships with the past (heritage), present (peer group), future (intergenerational), and spiritual. Past relationships (ancestral heritage) revealed adaptive competencies related to being rooted in a generational history and character trends, with potential implications for actions (see also Rubinstein et al., 2015). The peer group relationships (present relationships) mobilized generative activities toward unrelated older and younger people (see Rubinstein et al., 2015). Future relationships involving younger (related or unrelated) people required competencies for mediating strategies to address a concern for continuity. Spiritual relationships found expression in a commitment script, a sensitivity to the suffering of others, regardless of older or younger, related or unrelated.

A possible threat to the sustainability of the adaptive competencies in this case study was the drive to do something (e.g. coworkers should prepare food without Ma Luthuli’s directions), but without a relational focus, there is the risk that it could result in frustration or disengagement of the older women.

Literature Orientation Toward the Development of Therapeutic Guidelines

Older clients (mostly women) usually seek professional help for problems associated with health concerns, mental health disorders, or psychological problems (see Kropf, 2018; Smith, 2007; Soll-Morka & Kurpas, 2022). The presenting problem informs the nature of the assessment, which typically takes the form of a medical, psychiatric, or psychological assessment. Knight and Poon (2008), however, realized that the assessment of older

clients should go beyond the individual and recognize the impact of cohort-specific events, the unique socio-cultural context, and the immediate social environment in which they live, in addition to their unique aging process. Drawing on the results of the individual assessment, therapists plan appropriate interventions, which could take the form of medication and/or therapy, mostly from a cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, or interpersonal perspective (see Nowlan et al., 2016). The treatment plan aims to address the presenting problem on an individual basis, in a group setting (see Payne & Marcus, 2008; Stinson et al., 2010), or sometimes involving partners or the family (see Kropf, 2018).

Therapy is unquestionably beneficial to promote older clients' mental health and their physical or psychological wellbeing. However, therapy delivery depends on an adequately functioning health or social care system, or on individuals who are able to pay for the therapy they need. In a developing world context such as South Africa, these options, unfortunately, limit older clients'—particularly Black older persons'—access to therapy, because they are severely impoverished and continue to find themselves in an “undervalued social position and the associated economic and political disadvantages” (Smith, 2007, p. 280). Drawing on the retrospective case study's findings, some suggestions to inform therapy are offered.

Implications for Therapeutic Interventions

In low-resourced settings, therapeutic interventions should be aimed at the group or the collective and not the individual. Suggestions for providing therapy for older women in late adulthood who live in adverse environments are to:

- First determine how older women's agency and active participation could be promoted to adapt to 'unfit' environments while also being aware of individual vulnerabilities that would require additional complementary support/protection.
- Use a group/collected collated life story approach to obtain knowledge of the nature (conducive/unfavorable) of the different environments (physical, socio-historical, relational, spiritual) in which the older women lived across their life course.
- From the PEF, map older women's adaptive competencies to manage a fit with the different environments.
- For physical environments, consider the obstacles that prevent older women's optimal functioning, or change environments to enable an optimal fit. This relates to aging in the right place and age-friendly communities (WHO, 2007). (In this case study it was to lay paving to prevent older women from falling).

- The socio-historical environment is a distant context but informs the adaptation of older women, particularly across the life course. From a decolonial perspective, therapists recognize the accumulative effects of inequality and aim for the redistribution of resources and opportunities (see Kazeroony, 2023). Therapists as social advocates should challenge unfair and discriminatory practices against older women and identify and support the competencies of older women to adapt to rigid social environments. (The older woman, in this case, displayed agency and determination to pursue her goals, despite the rigidity of the environment.)
- The relational environment consists of different domains, in this instance: intergenerational relationships, with peers, ancestral relationships, and spiritual relationships. Older women interact with these different domains in ways that could have effective or ineffective outcomes, depending on the nature of their relational skills and their interactional styles (see Vorster et al., 2013). From a person-centred approach (see Cavé et al. 2024), the focus is on the specific relational domain, and using the presenting problem to design an appropriate relational intervention (see Vorster et al., 2013). For example, in this case, the older woman adopted a one-up position in relation to her coworkers irrespective of the relational context, and when her expectations were not met, she resorted to blaming and judgment which literature confirms are ineffective to obtain conducive relational outcomes (see Cavé et al. 2024; Vorster et al., 2013).

Conclusion

The case study described here illustrated how an older woman succeeded in developing competencies to counteract and, at the same time, adapt to adverse environments and in different relationships. Case study research is always to some extent biased, and this case is no exception. Hence, findings were contextualized with supporting data, using multiple data sources, and taking the necessary time and attention for data collection and analysis. The findings were used, not to draw linear conclusions about competencies in relation to specific environments or people, but to develop transferable knowledge to inform therapy guidelines for older women in their 80s in similar environments. It should be kept in mind that not all older individuals are equally creative and sufficiently resilient to develop the necessary adaptive competencies in the face of adversities that confront them. To this end, the life of an exceptional woman, who developed appropriate competencies in the face of prolonged adversity, provided helpful insights to draw on.

Notes

1. The Mmogo-method has been trademarked by the North-West University, South Africa.
2. Ma Luthuli is used in the article to show deep respect. The honorific title 'Ma' is often used in the South African context and refers to mother, irrespective of whether the relationship is familial related or unrelated.
3. Amoné Redelinghuys and Carlien Carl are hereby acknowledged for their participation as postgraduate students at the time.

Author Note

As a socio-gerontologist, Vera focuses on intra/intergenerational relationships and, from a community psychology perspective, on the contributions of older individuals in challenged contexts.

Data used for the findings were obtained from prolonged engagement and from a position of respect for an exceptional older woman who graciously agreed to share her life story. This article is a tribute to Ma Malebone Susan Luthuli.

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