

# Researching resilience: lessons learned from working with rural, Sesotho-speaking South African young people

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## Abstract

Theories of youth resilience neglect youths' lived experiences of what facilitates positive adjustment to hardship. The Pathways-to-Resilience Study addressed this by inviting Canadian, Chinese, Colombian, New Zealand and South African (SA) youths to share their resilience-related knowledge. In this article I report the challenges endemic to the rural, resource-poor, South African research site that complicated this Pathways ideal. I illustrate that blind application of a multi-country study design, albeit well-designed, potentially excludes youths with inaccessible parents, high mobility, and/or cellular telephone contact details. Additionally, I show that one-on-one interview methods do not serve Sesotho-speaking youths well, and that the inclusion of adult 'insiders' in a research team does not guarantee regard for local youths' insights. I comment critically on how these challenges were addressed and use this to propose seven lessons that are likely to inform, and support, youth-advantaging qualitative research in similar majority-world contexts.

## Keywords

qualitative, resilience research, Sesotho-speaking, South Africa, visual elicitation methods, youths

Young people's voices are often sidelined in what is published about child and youth resilience (Wright et al., 2013). Rather than offer youth-directed explanations of resilience, or the process of adjusting well to adversity, theories of why/how youth adjust well to hardship are likely to privilege the voices of adults (Liebenberg and Theron, 2015). This is even more probable when the young people in question are members of majority-world communities, or other marginalised groups (McCubbin and Moniz,

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2015). Sidelining youths' understandings of resilience is dangerous, not least because resilience relies, in part, on social ecologies making contextually- and culturally-relevant (i.e., meaningful) resources/supports available to youth (Ungar, 2011). Meaningful resource/support provision implies that *young people's* accounts of what makes a significant difference to their wellbeing are crucial. Unless youths' insights are prioritised, resilience-focused interventions, and/or preventative and policy initiatives are likely to have sub-optimal effects (Liebenberg, 2009).

The Pathways-to-Resilience Study (see [www.resilienceresearch.org](http://www.resilienceresearch.org)) sought to redress the dismissal of young people's insights. Across five countries, it prioritized understanding youths' views of resilience and aimed to 'provide a forum in which [youth] voices can be heard without the filters of adult perspectives and interests' (Munford and Sanders, 2004: 472). To this end, it was designed as a youth-centred study that combined quantitative and qualitative methods that would foreground young people's knowledge about what impedes and facilitates processes of positive adjustment amidst harsh life circumstances.

The aim of this article is to comment on how challenges endemic to the South African (SA) research site complicated the Pathways ideal of championing youths' knowledge about resilience, and to document constructive, and less constructive, responses to these complications. To do so, I draw on my experience as the principal investigator (PI) in the Pathways-to-Resilience Study, South Africa (2009-2014). The rationale for this focus is two-fold. First, it signposts how structural inequity and changing and/or conflicting worldviews confound implementation of an apparently solid, multi-country research design. Second, it sensitizes resilience-focused researchers to the criticality of contextually-sensitive, collaborative research processes that include a team of reflective insiders and outsiders (Liebenberg and Theron, 2015). The aforementioned hold lessons with potential value to qualitative researchers working with young people in the Global South and/or in marginalised communities.

## Context of the SA study

The SA participants were aged 13 to 19 (average age 16, SD 1.64). The majority (97.6%) self-identified as black<sup>1</sup>; girls constituted 52.7 percent of the sample. They lived in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District, a disadvantaged, rural area in the Free State province, which is chiefly inhabited by Sesotho-speakers, many of whom respect *Ubuntu*-related norms. In short, this context – a disadvantaged, rural, traditionally African one – was a proxy for structural barriers and sociocultural expectations (related to *Ubuntu*-values) that complicated the research process.

### Structural barriers

The Thabo Mofutsanyana District is characterized by poor infrastructure, including poorly maintained roads and erratic electricity supply (more so during thunderstorms). Its schools generally yield low annual pass rates and its healthcare system is inadequate (Thabo Mofutsanyana District Municipality, 2012). As in other parts of the Free State (FS), black families living in this district are especially familiar with social and

economic barriers. For instance, 60 percent of FS youths – majority black – subsist on approximately \$50 per month. One in three lives in families without any employed adults (Hall, 2012); 7 percent are orphans, again with higher frequency among black youths of school-going age; 39.1 percent have single mothers (Meintjies and Hall, 2012). Rural black men are typically absent from their children's lives, mostly because of sociopolitical and economic constraints (Richter et al., 2010). Their absence constitutes an additional disadvantage for young people (Theron, 2015).

In traditional black SA families, grandmothers and/or other kin are expected to raise children when parents/mothers migrate to urban areas in search of employment, or when grandchildren are orphaned (Ramphela, 2002). This is part of the traditional African culture<sup>2</sup> of interdependence, which includes raising children in a 'family community' (Mkhize, 2006: 187), rather than in nuclear families. Typically, however, these arrangements are informal rather than legal and necessitate young people relocating to kin who can support them (Fataar, 2010).

### *Ubuntu-related norms*

Traditionally, black SA children – especially in rural areas – are socialised to esteem and enact *Ubuntu*-values. This includes children being encouraged to live interdependently and in ways that are respectful, particularly of adults (Munyaka and Motlhabi, 2009). A norm associated with this, is that young people 'be quiet (voiceless), conform (honor their living and ancestral elders), and almost invisible when adults are present' (Akande, 2000: 62). Although allegiance to *Ubuntu*-related norms is changing, particularly as increasing numbers of (urban) black South Africans adopt Western ways of being (Ramphela, 2012), many rural black SA youths continue to defer to adults and/or respect their ancestors (Theron, 2015).

## **Tweaking the Pathways methodology to fit SA challenges<sup>3</sup>**

In short, a consequence of the above is that the voices and experiences of young people growing up in Thabo Mofutsanyana District can easily be disregarded. Following Smith (2012), this tendency made research with these young people even more imperative, but challenging. Table 1 summarises the four key challenges the SA team experienced in this regard<sup>4</sup>. The sections that follow detail these challenges and how the SA team ('we' henceforth) managed them.

### *Challenge 1: complicated consent processes*

The Pathways approach to informed consent was compatible with 'Global North "standards"' (Jeanes and Kay, 2013: 22): when young people were younger than 18 the informed consents of parents/guardians and youths were sought. Although this approach favoured the best interests of youth participants, and wished to balance parental responsibility with youths' agency and competence (Munford and Sanders, 2004), its implementation in the SA site was potentially unfair. This emerged during briefing discussions<sup>5</sup> with young people recommended to the study by its Community Advisory Panel (CAP)<sup>6</sup> and CAP-facilitated

**Table 1.** Summary of site-related challenges.

| Challenge             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Implication if challenges not addressed                                                                                   |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Structural barriers:  | Erratic/no contact between youth and parents/legal caregivers confounded consent procedures that mandate parental/legal caregiver co-consent<br>High mobility and socioeconomic disadvantage equal low contactability and hampered follow-up                                                                                             | → Continued under-reporting of young people's explanations of risk and resilience; incomplete understanding of resilience |
| Ubuntu-related norms: | Youth socialisation to be silent and/or to respond respectfully to adults translated into polite, brief responses to interview questions<br>Divergent values and growing disregard for traditional African ways-of-being prompted adult-insider disregard for youths' insights that link resilience to enactment of <i>Ubuntu</i> -norms |                                                                                                                           |

gatekeepers. Many youths divulged irregular/no contact with their biological parents, mostly because of kinship living arrangements. Because these kin were typically not their legal guardians, adolescents living with kin were unable to have consent forms co-signed by parents/legal guardians. As noted by others (for example, Jeanes and Kay, 2013; Strode et al., 2014) this implies that ethical procedures discriminated against young people with poor/no access to parents by precluding their equitable participation. Indeed, Strode and Slack (2011) argue that in contexts of minimal research risk (such as that of the Pathways Study) adolescents should be invited to consent independently, and that persons involved in the day-to-day care of younger children be asked to provide proxy consent (for example, kin, teachers). Likewise Jeanes and Kay (2013) reported that in traditional/rural African communities, it is common practice for an authoritative community member (for example, the school principal, an elder) to provide proxy consent.

Other youths who attended the briefing sessions reported living in child-headed households, or on their own, or on the street (with occasional use of shelters for street children). They too had no/limited access to parents/legal guardians, and were thus also effectively barred from participating. In many ways, researcher demands for parent/guardian co-consent was disrespectful of the adult roles these youths fulfilled daily (Jeanes and Kay, 2013).

To resolve the above, the SA Pathways team consulted its CAP and learned that it was customary, local practice for respected adults (for example, school principals, teachers, clergy, social workers) to fulfil parent roles (including providing proxy consent). Thus, with the knowledge of its institutional ethics committee, we modified the consent process such that when youths wished to participate, but could not obtain parent/legal guardian signatures, school principals/teachers/social workers trusted by the participants would be asked to co-sign consent. Co-consent followed detailed information about the project, and such adults' verification that adolescents were not being coerced to participate, or being made vulnerable by participating. This adjustment of 'Global North "standards"' (Jeanes and Kay, 2013:22) offered an ethical solution to a consent design

that could have marginalised certain youth voices: no youths wishing to participate were excluded by the consent procedures.

### *Challenge 2: complexities of follow-up in a disadvantaged context*

A criticism of resilience studies relates to cross-sectional designs, or once-off explorations of resilience (Panter-Brick, 2015). They offer limited understanding of resilience processes over time. Consequently, the qualitative follow-up design of the five-year Pathways study made good methodological sense and youth permission for follow-up was sought. If youths agreed, they were requested to provide email, telephonic and postal contact details.

Most SA participants agreed. They generally provided cellular telephone numbers. Still, approximately nine months later, we struggled to engage youths in the follow-up. This is not peculiar to South Africa: participant attrition is common in longitudinal studies elsewhere (for example, Thimasarn-Anwar et al., 2014).

During follow-up attempts, SA researchers learned that youths had often been forced to relocate and lived too far away (usually in other provinces) to participate in follow-up activities. Alternatively, the telephone numbers provided were defunct. The CAP suggested that such numbers were linked to short-term cellular phone contracts that had not been renewed, probably because of limited finances. In some instances where the numbers were still functional, they led to contact with the only member of kin who had a cellular phone/telephone. Cautious negotiation about the best time to telephone again, in order to speak to the young person in question, was seldom fruitful. This raised questions about whether adult kin obstructed youths' participation, or whether this illustrated the sporadic nature of youths' contact with the kin member who was contactable. Because few participants had dependable access to electricity/the internet/cellular phones, attempted contact via social media was equally unsuccessful.

The above necessitated that we work through the same gatekeepers (mostly teachers) that originally provided access to participants. This was an ethical conundrum: although we only contacted youths that had agreed (in writing) to follow-up contact, this agreement did not specify that future contact would occur via the same gatekeepers that facilitated initial contact. After consultation with the CAP, we concluded that a neutral request via gatekeepers potentiated no harm. To this end, gatekeepers were requested to inform a specific participant that the Pathways team was busy with the second phase of their research project (as specified in the original letter of information about the project) and was keen to include the participant in this next phase. Gatekeepers provided the participant with new letters of information/consent and if participants (and their parents/guardians/adult acting 'in loco parentis') consented, researchers arranged convenient dates and times for the qualitative activities.

### *Challenge 3: methodological cul-de-sacs versus methodological expressways*

The Pathways research design foregrounded one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as the preferred qualitative methodology and advised use of the interview protocol developed by the Resilience Research Centre (RRC).<sup>7</sup> This choice, which was endorsed by all

the country-partners (including me), reflected the universal popularity of interviews and implied a Neo-positivist approach that respected youth participants as being capable of insightful, detailed answers about what informs resilience processes (Roulston, 2010). Nonetheless, the challenges of interviews are common knowledge and researchers are cautioned that '*individual interviews* can be confronting for some children and young people; in some contexts, it may be inappropriate to interview children or young people on their own' (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015: 121).

Given the above, and in order to determine the usefulness of the interview protocol, we piloted it (following consent by young people and a parent/caregiver). After skilled researchers had conducted ten one-on-one interviews using the protocol, the need for methodological adjustment was glaring. Youths provided polite, brief responses to interview questions. For example, in response to 'What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?' a 15-year old, orphaned boy who lived with his pensioner grandmother replied: 'I tell my grandmother that I have a problem and then she will tell me what to do'. All follow-up probes led to similarly succinct or sketchy responses. Interviews by younger researchers (for example, students in their twenties), and researchers who shared participants' ethnicity – i.e., researchers whose positionality overlapped with that of participants (Jakobsen, 2012) – produced similar results.

We considered whether the laconic answers reflected that participating youths had 'consented' to participate because an adult researcher had asked them to – i.e., had power issues precluded their freedom to decline participation (Jeanes and Kay, 2013)? However, given the cautious consent procedure, we theorised that the problem probably lay with the individual-focused, semi-structured interview approach. In many ways this resonated with Jakobsen's experience in Tanzania: she tried three individual interviews but desisted when 'respondents were visibly distressed and gave short, incoherent and haphazard answers.' (2012: 128). We concluded that, as intimated by Akande (2000), Sesotho-speaking youth are socialised to defer to adults/people with power (for example, researchers from a university) and to provide concise, polite answers to adults' questions. Apparently traditional African conversation norms that discourage individuals – particularly those, such as young people, with less status – from voicing an independent opinion (Jakobsen, 2012), held sway at the SA site.

Thus, in order to create a more comfortable, engaging space for youth participants, we adjusted the Pathways methodology and implemented visual elicitation techniques with sex-specific groups of youths. Visual elicitation techniques involve participant-created artifacts (for example, drawings, photographs) that provide a stimulus for a written/verbal exploration of a research phenomenon (Prosser, 2011). We chose visual methods because of their capacity to facilitate unconstrained, active participation (for example, Liebenberg, 2009; Mitchell, 2011). The failed individual interviews and the CAP's suggestion that groups would resonate better with interdependent ways-of-being and so be a better fit for Sesotho-speaking young people explains our group-based approach. Additionally, working in groups gave participants numerical supremacy over us, thereby lessening the power imbalance between (adult) researchers and (youth) participants (Jakobsen, 2012). The CAP recommended working separately with boys and girls to preempt gendered dominance stereotypes.

Still, we proceeded cautiously (Smith, 2005) – with their permission, we ‘tested’ all methods on the CAP first. If the CAP was confident that these methods would be comfortable for local youth, following informed consent, we engaged groups of youths. The methods included: draw-and-write (Mitchell et al., 2011), photo elicitation (Liebenberg, 2009), participatory video (Mitchell et al., 2012), and Mmogo™ clay-modelling (Roos, 2012). The brief for these activities requested youths to portray (via a drawing/photographs/video/clay representation) how they adjusted well to challenging life-worlds. With the exception of draw-and-write in which participants wrote an explanation of their drawing, the methods prompted informal, focus-group-like conversations that provided richer understandings of what facilitated risk and/or resilience. In this way, young people co-analysed their data – an important facet of research *with* young people (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

Using the above, 230 youth generated compelling visual and narrative accounts of risk and/or resilience. The richness of their accounts echoed Liebenberg’s (2009: 444–445) assertion: ‘When research participants actively reconstruct their reality through images ..., they use a powerful medium to help the researcher understand their reality’. Much of the richness was in how visual artefacts – in tandem with youths’ own explanations – facilitated explicit, youth-directed understanding of how social worlds shape resilience processes. Young people’s ‘subjective experiences of their environment’ (Wessells, 2014) became apparent. In so doing, for boys and girls, the enabling capacity of women (typically mothers, grandmothers, female teachers), cultural practices (especially ancestral ceremonies and faith-based practices), and education pre-dominated (see Theron, 2015). Put differently, the ‘elements of social life that are taken for granted within adultist perspectives of childhood’ (Murray, 2009: 478) were exposed, allowing a fuller understanding that is so crucial to supporting youth resilience (Panter-Brick, 2015).

An interesting question that arises from our use of varied elicitation methods is whether/how method shapes the data that are produced. To illustrate, the methods that prompted robust inclusion of teachers were draw-and-write and photo elicitation. The method that prompted repeated mention of cultural beliefs and culturally-salient supports was the Mmogo™ (see Figure 1). Could the former be because the method included instruments and paraphernalia traditionally associated with school (i.e., paper, pencils, cameras?)<sup>8</sup> Might the latter be because the method included materials that are traditionally African (i.e., clay, grass twigs, beads)? What does this imply about researching resilience (and other abstract phenomena) and the need for qualitative researchers to be vigilant about including a variety of methods, including ones that are culturally-/contextually-sensitive at the time of the study? Certainly, the use of varied, culturally- and contextually-sensitive methods generated data that challenged hegemonic Western assumptions of how resilience is facilitated (Roulston, 2010). As Theron (2015) reported, it made the power of women-caregivers and spirituality (adherence to Christian and ancestral practices) salient – neither is prioritised in minority world studies of resilience (see Werner, 2013).

Similar to the Tanzanian participants in the study by Jakobsen (2012), youth enthusiasm for the adjusted qualitative methods was significant. Their spontaneous comments implied that the methods had therapeutic value. For example, at the end of a Mmogo™ session, one girl asked me: ‘Why are you helping us?’ An exploration of her question



**Figure 1.** A model of a traditional fire and cooking place. Siphso explained: ‘When I’m facing difficulties, I stick to my culture and the cultural practices that I have learnt...We slaughter goats and we perform traditions [ancestral rituals]. ...’.

(after gently righting the power-balance by pointing out that they were helping us) revealed that she and others had experienced the method as salutary. It afforded them the sense that an adult was truly interested in their insights, and had listened respectfully and in a non-judgemental way. Other studies have similarly reported the ‘cathartic value’ (Biddle et al., 2013: 360) of qualitative methods that afford youths the experience of being respectfully listened to (Urry et al., 2014).

The above advantages should, however, not deify visual elicitation methods. Language remained an issue, even though the methods were not solely reliant on language (as in traditional interviews). For example, there is no word for ‘resilience’ in Sesotho – it is translated as a lengthy phrase which relates to being strong in life/doing well in life, when life is hard. Accordingly, in the prompts, the English was adapted to read: ‘What has helped you to do well in your life so far, even though you face difficulties? Please [make a drawing/take a photograph/etc.] of what has helped you to do well in life so far’.

Participants had the choice to speak/write in their home language (typically Sesotho) because the Pathways team included researchers and local research assistants (RA) who spoke participants’ home language(s) and who could, therefore, translate. However, the wording of the translation reflected the researcher’s/RA’s choice – this raised concerns about aspects of youths’ messages possibly being altered, muted, or amplified. Even though all translations were back-translated, it is possible that translation introduced subtle changes. This aligns with Caretta’s (2015: 500) concern that in cross-cultural/-language research: ‘participants’ knowledge is mediated by the interpreter/assistant. Thus knowledge production is not a value-free process leading to situated knowledge, as interpreters can be influenced by their own beliefs and preferences ... in the rendering of their statements’.

At times participants explained concepts that researchers/RAs found difficult to translate, even though they spoke fluent Sesotho, as illustrated below. This related to some

issues being infrequently discussed in English (for example, initiation, ancestral, or other traditional ceremonies).

Participant 3: Speaks in Sesotho

Researcher 1 (translates): When we have problems, we ... now, how can I put this?

Participant 6 (supports translation): We make ceremonies.

Researcher 1: Yes, we make a ceremony for the ancestors in order to deal with the situation that we are in ...

When participants preferred to speak English (generally their third or fourth language), their phraseology was often convoluted or grammatically incorrect. Like Swartz (2011), this meant we had to reflect on the ethics of including verbatim quotes which could prompt misleading impressions of poor intelligence and fan negative racial stereotypes, versus adjusting the language youths had used to voice their experiences and insights. We decided to correct glaring language errors (for example, mixed use of pronouns, incorrect verb conjugation) because this did not detract from youths' messages.

Another potential complication related to the power of Mmogo™ and participatory video,<sup>9</sup> coupled with the focus of our enquiry, to trigger emotion.<sup>10</sup> For example, in one Mmogo™ session, a 16-year old cried as she related how she had been shunned when her mother died. Her father threatened to kill her, to emphasize his rejection of her. This was told in the course of her explaining that a maternal aunt had stepped in as a surrogate mother and supported her to be strong in life. Her listening peers and the researchers were visibly moved; a psychologist who was present contained the situation. Then, a researcher (who lived in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District) suggested singing a Sesotho hymn together. In traditional black SA communities, singing and dancing are used to assuage emotion. During the singing, the girls' voices swelled and soon they were smiling and laughing. One girl asked: 'What gives you that thing that wants to make a difference – what? What motivates you to help us?' This magnified the importance of contextually-relevant closure and so, to conclude sessions, we often invited participants to take the lead in traditional singing, where we sang and clapped hands/danced with the participants, after having debriefed them.

#### *Challenge 4: positionality and championing youth insights*

Pathways research teams included 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. In some ways this is akin to Smith's (2012: 180) promotion of 'bi-cultural research' or 'research that involves both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers working on a research project and shaping that project together'. Insider-outsider research collaboration supports deeper understanding of local insights and the likelihood that local perspectives (including those of young people) are championed (McCubbin and Moniz, 2015).

Similar to Angotti and Sennott (2015), the outsiders in the SA team comprised SA academics, research interns and doctoral students who lived outside of the Thabo Mofutsanyana District. Even as South Africans, we were relative strangers to the Thabo Mofutsanyana District. Our South African-ness was insufficient to provide a profound

grasp of the daily life and customs of Sesotho-speakers living in this district. To illustrate, I have a deep understanding of the challenges of SA rural contexts and marginalization, having grown up 'othered' in a rural context similar to that of the research site. However, my privileged position as a white, English-speaking South African and my current urban address precluded my being an insider. Despite purposeful endeavors to respectfully familiarize myself with the site and participants; rigorous, continuous reflexivity; regular meetings with a peer debriefer; and the five-year span of the project, I remained an outsider.

Inviting local lay and professional adults who served youth in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District to constitute a CAP and actively vet and guide the research process was an attempt to facilitate respectful inclusion of insiders (for detail, see Theron, 2013). In addition to being mostly black South Africans, these locals were intimately acquainted with community customs and the challenges local youths faced. Most spoke participants' mother tongues. The majority grew up in circumstances similar to those of the adolescent participants. A black academic, who functioned as the project's community-liaison officer, facilitated the CAP. He grew up in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District. Although his lectureship at a SA university meant he spent time out of the district, his family continued to live locally. He too spoke participants' African mother tongues. Likewise, three local, unemployed, literate adults of the same ethnicity as the participants were included as field workers. Along with the CAP, these insiders provided invaluable explanations of local youths' 'ways of being, of knowing, and relating to the world' (Smith, 2005: 86).

Still, at times, some insiders were somewhat removed from participants' disadvantaged realities, and/or their enactment of *Ubuntu*-norms. As noted earlier, participants reported spiritual supports (i.e., ancestors, God) and caring women as part of what enabled resilience. There was scant reference to men (for example, fathers). When the outsiders (who did the preliminary analysis of the full data-set) invited insider comment on the emerging findings, there were mixed reactions, even though findings mirrored youths' cultural and contextual realities, verbatim accounts, and co-analyses. Most men were uncomfortable with women-focused explanations of youths' resilience processes; the women felt vindicated. Insiders who were devoutly Christian, not raised to respect ancestral practices, and/or acculturated to increasingly popular Western ways of being (see Ramphela, 2012), were unnerved by ancestor-related findings. They expressed concern that this might discourage Christianity, or confirm colonial views of black Africans. In comparison, other insiders who were raised to respect spiritual practices that included God and ancestors 'heard' and respected the voices of youths that credited God and/or their ancestors for their doing well in life.

Thus, the inclusion of insiders did not guarantee the championing of youths' voices. Some insiders interpreted, and/or opposed, local ways as '*other* ways of being, of knowing, and relating to the world' (Smith, 2005: 86). Put differently, the above-mentioned pathways of resilience were regarded as 'atypical' (Ungar, 2011: 8), or non-normative, and therefore not deserving of mention. This probably related to insiders' social standing at the time of the study and to intersecting identity dimensions – i.e., the gendered, generational, classed, national, ethnic, value-based/religious, and racial dimensions of an identity, all of which interconnect in complex ways (Angotti and Sennott, 2015; Geleta, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2015). For some insiders, it seemed that gendered, religious, and

generational identity dimensions downplayed ethnic or *Ubuntu* dimensions (for example, valuing of spirituality that includes esteem for ancestors and of interdependence which includes reliance on strong women). Ostensibly, as in the study by Maxwell et al. (2015), shared locality, nationality, and/or ethnicity offered an insufficient basis for appreciation of youth insights. This flags the complexity of defining insiders and cautions against assumptions of insider homogeneity (Smith, 2005). It urges dismissal of dualistic notions of insiders versus outsiders; this binary position is ‘over-simplified and presume[s] that social positions are static’ (Angotti and Sennott, 2015: 438).

As PI I needed to ensure that the above complexity did not jeopardize participants’ insights. In Smith’s (2012: 217) words, I was ultimately responsible for ‘getting the story right’. Put differently, the findings needed to be true to the voices of young people themselves (both in terms of the data they produced and how they explained/co-analyzed these data), rather than those of adults associated with the study<sup>11</sup>. This was particularly important given that youth participants interpreted their participation as an opportunity for agency and amplification of *their* knowledge – a departure from their traditionally disempowered position. As one young woman commented: ‘[participating] made me proud – you wanted to know *my* story’.

Accordingly, we engaged in debate to support finalization of the findings. The outsiders (especially the graduate students) were impartial, so long as the findings mirrored youth accounts of risk and resilience. This does not imply that there was naivety about young people’s accounts being neutral or nonaligned with those of socialization agents or other sources of power,<sup>12</sup> but rather that youth-reported/translator-mediated accounts not be altered after the fact, or discounted by adults. Likewise, insiders who ‘heard’ youths’ voices were staunchly supportive of the emerging findings. This debate lessened opposition to apparently controversial findings: ‘I forgot, but now I am reminded – our ancestors are important resources for our children. It is good to remember this.’ (CAP member).

‘Getting the story right’ (Smith, 2012: 217) also necessitated a return to the data and a careful search for any evidence that suggested that the emerging findings reified, objectified, reduced, trivialized, or misrepresented youths’ experiences (Wilcox et al., 2012). This highlighted how specific methods facilitated youths’ reference to specific resources (for example, draw-and-write and teachers; Mmogo™ and ancestors), and that the central findings were robustly reported about equally by boys and girls across *all* methods. The persuasiveness of the saturated visual evidence, in tandem with youths’ explanations (i.e., their co-analyses of the original data), provided reassurance that findings reported the perspectives of young people, as recounted by them at the time of the study, rather than those of the CAP/researcher adults.

The final set of findings was translated into a resilience-supporting intervention, entitled Khazimula.<sup>13</sup> ‘Khazimula’ (meaning ‘to shine’) was co-produced by the research team, community members and young people. To support its broad dissemination, 30 local young people scripted and created short DVDs in which they explained the core elements of Khazimula. Much like Jeanes and Kay’s (2013) participants, youths spontaneously included poetry, music, dance and cultural rituals (such as visiting a traditional healer) in their scripts. After a number of rehearsals (supported by Pathways graduate students), we contracted a professional to video-record the youths’ messages.



**Figure 2.** Post-graduate student prompting youth to use Khazimula T-shirts to disseminate findings.<sup>14</sup>

Each youth received a copy, as did youths' schools. These were used to spread information about Khazimula. In this way, 'the filter of adult perspectives and interests' (Munford and Sanders, 2004: 472) was minimized, and the 30 youths saw themselves as original Khazimula ambassadors who could potentially make a difference in other youths' lives. Each of the 30 youths received a Khazimula-branded soccer ball and T-shirt each (see Figure 2). The rationale was that when youths used/wore these, it would prompt questions and so provide spontaneous opportunities for youths to teach peers and community members about Khazimula and how communities can support resilience in youth-appropriate ways. Given youths' resource-poor context, both items represented meaningful tokens of appreciation for youths' contribution to Pathways. In a follow-up with these youth (around eight months later), there was frequent reference to the usefulness of the T-shirts and how these supported youths to give voice to their resilience knowledge:

Some, they are like old people, they think these T-shirts are political. We sit down with them: 'No, they are not political. They are T-shirts whereby we are wearing them with pride [because] we are making a difference'. So yeah, because old people always ask, we sit down and tell them stories about Khazimula.

## Emerging lessons

From the above, I distil seven lessons. They underscore the importance of interrogating and adjusting 'taken-for-granted ways of organizing, conducting, and disseminating research and knowledge' (Smith, 2005: 88).

### *Collaborate in multi-country studies with flexible lead investigators and funders.*

The multiple changes that the SA team made were facilitated by a project lead and funders that respected a country-level PI's discretion to make context-relevant changes and accommodated such adaptations. Had this been different, SA youth voices would have been muted.

**Revisit dominant consent procedures.** Parental consent/co-consent is widely endorsed in Global North and South contexts. Although its intention is protective, mandating parental/guardian consent/co-consent will marginalise SA youths raised in informal kinship systems along with those who live on their own, or on the streets, or in child-headed households. The aforementioned is not unique to Africa – for example, Chinese resilience studies report similar youth living arrangements (Tian and Wang, 2015). Even studies in Global North countries have necessitated multiple consent processes that fit participants' heterogeneous contexts and protect ethno-racial minorities (see Ungar and Liebenberg, 2013). This implies that conventional research ethics cannot be blindly applied across either global North or South contexts and that application of conservative approaches to consent stand to silence young people in both hemispheres.

**Plan for complicated follow-up.** In resource-poor contexts, where telephonic or social media contact are unreliable, and/or youths' disadvantaged life-worlds necessitate mobility, meticulous planning is needed to facilitate follow-up. This could include participant permission to work through community-based gatekeepers (for example, teachers) to establish follow-up. Alternatively, it could include yearly, face-to-face contact sessions (with dates stipulated in the original letter of information) that include some reward for participant attendance (such as a food hamper). It could also include asking youths to provide the contact details of two trusted people via whom researchers could re-establish connections with them (Thimasarn-Anwar et al., 2014).

**Choose participatory methods that take the spotlight off youths.** In order to use qualitative methods effectively in African contexts, Jakobsen (2012: 114) emphasized the importance of finding ways to 'decentre the role of the researcher and increase participants' ownership of research process'. Certainly, in the case of this SA study, championing the insights of Sesotho-speaking youth essentially demanded a research process that also took the spotlight off youths – using creative, visual elicitation methods encouraged focus on what participants created/depicted, rather than on participants themselves, which was culturally important. Doing this in groups, rather than one-on-one, added to participants being comfortable and to greater ownership of the research process. Although these methods were not without their own drawbacks, they did support generation of rich data that spotlighted rural Sesotho-speaking youths' particular understandings of risk and resilience at a given point in time.

**Terminate data-generation sessions in contextually-sensitive ways.** In line with Global-North procedures, the SA team included psychologists/counsellors to debrief youth participants as necessary. However, singing and dancing offered more effective closure to data-generation sessions. Qualitative researchers would advantage their participants by learning beforehand what current contextually-relevant closure entails and observing this.

**Disregard 'insider'/other adult voices that disrespect youth insights.** Advocating youths' understandings demanded disregard for the traditional SA practice of prioritising adult voices. This disregard needs to be cautious though and informed by a team. A team which includes insiders, outsiders, and/or those who fall in-between (Maxwell et al., 2015), who are willing to engage critically with the fluidity of culture and context, together with irrefutable visual and narrative evidence, will likely support the prioritisation of youths' insights above that of adults.

Such critical engagement needs to extend to the multi-dimensionality of identity and how this shapes researcher positionality. Prior studies call attention to how positionality influences data generation in multicultural contexts such as South Africa (for example, Maxwell et al., 2015). The SA Pathways experience extends this to data analysis, particularly team-facilitated analyses. Thus, all research team members (university- and community-affiliated) need to interrogate the assumptions and cognitive schemas that their positionality prompts (Geleta, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2015), and to account for how these shape interpretation of the data.

**Encourage youth-co-led research.** I acknowledge the shortcoming of limiting youths' roles in the project to participants and disseminators. I am mindful of the irony of working to champion youth voices, but asking local adults (i.e., the CAP) to facilitate recruitment and how such adult gatekeeping could potentially have excluded youths who considered themselves eligible (Munford and Sanders, 2004). I am equally mindful that as an adult research team, we positioned young people as contributors to 'our' research agenda and in doing so probably curtailed their agency and reinforced their marginal status (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). I wonder how youth-representation on the CAP might have influenced insiders' responses to the emerging findings, or how a youth-directed research agenda would have facilitated youth agency. Essentially, these limitations signpost that studies which seek to champion youth knowledge, would be well served to invite young people to co-produce the research, as gatekeepers, researchers, and advisory panel members.

## Conclusion

Jakobsen observed that making methods work in Africa demands more than simply 'respecting local culture' (2012: 118). In Jakobsen's study, this required at least four modifications of the focus group method. In the SA Pathways study, making the research process work was perhaps more about knowing when to accommodate contextually-relevant practices and when to resist them. At times, this required a departure from the (black) SA tradition of deferring to elders (for example, debating CAP discomfort around contentious findings). At other times, it meant embracing local ways-of-doing (for example, singing and dancing as a closure mechanism; acknowledging respect for trusted local adults as parent-figures). Knowing when to do which hinged on three actions: (i) recognition of the fluidity of cultural values in a rapidly westernising South Africa (Ramphele, 2012), (ii) reflexivity about the multi-dimensionality of identity and how this shapes insider status (Maxwell et al., 2015), and (iii) commitment to interrogating and managing instances where adult acculturation and specific identity dimensions (for example, gendered or religious) jeopardize the knowledge claims put forth by young people. Ideally, the usefulness of these three actions needs continued investigation in order to further advance understanding of how to make research processes work in ways that advantage marginalised young people and prioritise their knowledge claims.

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## Notes

1. Despite SA's democratic changes in 1994, its people continue to be identified in terms of four race groups – Blacks, Coloureds, Indians and Whites – and to self-identify race using these terms.
2. My references to traditional African culture reflect published comment on 'African culture' by indigenous Africans (for example, Mkhize, 2006; Ramphele, 2012). Use of this term respects the cultural commonalities (for example, *Ubuntu* values) that indigenous African peoples share, without denying African heterogeneity.
3. Except in the instances that the Pathways design required adjustment to accommodate the contextual restraints of the SA study, I do not detail the Pathways design. Design detail can be obtained from the Resilience Research Centre (RRC, [www.resilienceresearch.org](http://www.resilienceresearch.org)).
4. Note that these challenges are not endemic or intrinsic to qualitative studies. Quantitative studies are also challenged by complexities relating to consent, follow-up, and privileging youth perspectives.
5. Young people understood that this initial meeting was an opportunity to learn what the research project entailed and not a commitment to participate.
6. For detail on the CAP of the SA Pathways project see Theron (2013), which includes detailed comment on how the SA team and the CAP collaborated to shape the research project. Because of these prior publications, the current article does not comment on how this collaboration was integral to the project's success.
7. The protocol is available to download from the RRC's website. The questions facilitate learning about youths' supports and service infrastructure.
8. In disadvantaged South African communities, cameras are typically associated with official school photos.
9. In our experience, participants were overwhelmed by emotion only when we used Mmogo™ and participatory video – draw-and-talk and photo-elicitation did not trigger overwhelming emotion.
10. A counsellor or psychologist was present at all sessions, but no participants requested counselling.
11. There is a clear understanding in the resilience literature that the detail of what enables resilience is likely to be context- and culture-specific, partly because young people are socialized to value protective resources that are culturally- and contextually-relevant. In this way, what young people relate about their resilience processes will always – to some extent – reflect 'adultist perspectives' (Murray, 2009: 478). Our concern was more with adults – by virtue of their positions of power – silencing parts/all of what young people foreground when they explain their resilience processes, should these not fit with 'adultist perspectives'.
12. Theron (2015) explains how SA Pathways findings constituted situated or culturally- and contextually-influenced – i.e., not neutral – knowledge. Clearly this knowledge is a hybrid of young people's lived experiences and what they have been socialized to value as resilience-supporting.

13. For details on Khazimula, see Theron, 2014.
14. Participants and their parents/guardians provided consent for photographs to be published.

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