NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE AFTER A PERIOD OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND CRIME

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ABSTRACT

Substance abuse and criminality are critical problems in South Africa, yet little is understood about youth resilience. Through narrative analysis, this study sought to gain an understanding of resilience in eight men who have disengaged from criminality and substance abuse. Childhood difficulties, ineffective parenting, delinquent peers, and a lack of commitment to school, all contributed to involvement in risk behaviours. A desire to change, often triggered by a pivotal event, was important in turning away from risk behaviours. Other contributing factors included the negative impact of drug abuse, leadership and social skills, academic competence, access to social support and religious beliefs. Maintaining a prosocial life style was supported by giving back to others and an effective substance abuse programme.

Key Words: resilience; substance abuse; criminality; gang involvement; interviews; narrative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse is prevalent amongst South African youth. For instance, 28.9% of Cape Town adolescents and 31.8% of Durban adolescents who presented at trauma units were found to have positive breath alcohol levels, and 15.4% of Cape Town adolescents to 28.6% of Durban adolescents tested positive for methaqualone (Parry et al., 2004). Substance abuse is not only problematic for the user him/herself, but also has costs to society such as the strong associations with criminal behaviour (De La Rosa, Rugh, & Rojas, 2005; Sullivan & Hamilton, 2007; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2004). Arrestees in South Africa have

been found to be highly likely to have used an intoxicating drug at the time of arrest (Parry, Plüddemann, Louw & Leggett, 2004).

An important question to ask, therefore, is how young South Africans might be resilient in desisting from substance misuse and crime. While there is some debate in the literature as to whether resilience might be limited to those who have never yielded to risk factors or displayed behavioural problems (for instance, Masten, 2001), others understand resilience in broader terms, seeing it as successful adaptation or recovery after a period of maladaptation or developmental difficulty (Roisman, 2005; Stajduhar, Funk, Shaw, Bottorff, & Johnson, 2009). It is in this latter sense that

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we use the term, and we approach it as a process that involves both the capacity of an individual to navigate towards and negotiate for resources that will promote their health, and as a condition of that individual's family, community and culture to provide these resources (Ungar, 2008).

Risk factors for becoming involved with substance abuse and criminality include the experience of adversity, associating with delinquent peers, poor parenting and low levels of school commitment (Anda et al., 2006; Esbenson, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2009; Hawkins et al., 2000; Kliewer & Murrelle, 2007; Palermo, 2009; Tiet et al., 2010; Xiamong et al., 2002). Involvement in antisocial behaviour can be divided into two groups (Moffitt, 1993): one, smaller group engages in antisocial activities at every life stage (life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour), while another, larger group engage in these activities only during adolescence (adolescent-limited antisocial behaviour). However, "snares" (such as substance misuse) can make it more difficult for even this latter group to disengage from antisocial activities (Moffit, 1993).

By contrast, coming from a supportive family environment, low levels of parental discord, greater bonding with teachers and less engagement with delinquent peers have all been identified as protective mechanisms involved in resilience to substance abuse and criminality (Carr & Vandiver, 2002; Meschke & Patterson, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2000; Ryan, Miller-Loesi, & Nieri, 2007; Stoiber & Good, 1998; Tiet et al., 2010; Xiamong et al., 2002). Agency and the role of the social context are also important aspects of the resilience process, but tend to be under-emphasised in resilience studies. Studies that have explored these highlight the role of self-reflection (individuals reflect on the consequences of abusing substances and recognise that they need to make changes in their lives) and the development of a personal sense of control and choice (whereby individuals actively make changes in their lives), as well as social support and religious practices (Mohatt et al., 2007; Stajduhar, Funk, Shaw, Bottorff, & Johnson, 2009; Todis,

Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, & D'Ambrosio, 2001).

Very little resilience research has, however, been conducted on the African continent, where living and social service conditions may be different from developed-world contexts. The aim of this research was to gain an understanding of how individuals deal with the risks they experience, their personal agency in the resilience process (Rutter, 2007), and the role of their particular context (Ungar, 2008).

METHOD

Research Design

A narrative research design was employed in this research as it offered insight into how the participants' experiences informed the resilience process; and how their styles of coping and effective use of resources within their environments contributed to their adaptation to adversity (Hauser, Golden, & Allen, 2006).

Participants

Eight, English-speaking men ranging in age from 18-42 years were interviewed. They were drawn from a faith-based substance abuse program that serves men from a working class community, and were selected on the basis that they had histories of substance abuse and criminality but had disengaged from antisocial behaviour and now work for the substance abuse program from which they were recruited.

Data collection

Narrative interviews were used in this research. The interviews were unstructured, and several broad, open-ended questions on the topic of inquiry were formulated.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Cape Town. The participants were interviewed individually at their place of employment. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the

transcripts were then rendered anonymous by the use of pseudonyms for both the participants and their communities. Once a draft of the findings had been prepared, findings were presented to the participants for further comment via a focus group discussion (Riessman, 1993).

Data analysis

The data was analysed using narrative analysis and thematic narrative analysis. Narrative analysis allows for exploration of the individual's agency by preserving and looking for meanings within the narrative accounts, thereby privileging the narrator's experience (Hauser & Allen, 2006; Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis also allows for exploration of contextual elements as the researcher can look for aspects within narratives that involve other people, cultural conventions and social systems (Fraser, 2004; Hauser et al., 2006). Thematic narrative analysis was used as it allows for exploration of aspects of resilience which have been identified in past literature (Riessman, 2008).

The names of both participants and their communities have been changed, in order to preserve their anonymity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The structure and organisation of the narratives

Participants' narratives were generally organised temporally (Riessman, 2000) and followed a common trajectory: they began their interviews with a discussion of their childhood experiences. They then moved on to discuss their introduction to drugs and criminality, the drug and crime-related activities they took part in, and the difficulties they experienced as a result of these activities. Many of them went on to discuss how they formed the desire to stop these activities. Almost all of them ended their narratives with a discussion of their current involvements. The stories they told tended to be quite rich in detail and complexities.

The general temporal arrangement of these stories along this common trajectory, as well as their attention to detail may indicate that these participants understand their resilience as a coherent but complicated process with many different aspects. What this would imply is that their resilience involves active navigation of their environment in an attempt to overcome adversity (Ungar, 2008). The description of the findings (below) follows that common trajectory.

Becoming involved with substance abuse and criminality

Although the system of apartheid has long been dismantled, inequality still exists across racial categories in terms of employment, housing and access to adequate health care and education (Barbarin & Richter, 2001). Seven of the eight participants grew up in low socio-economic suburbs where they were exposed to substance use, crime and gang-related activities. As Liam notes, "growing up here in Oakhurst it was about gangs all the time"; and Luke acknowledges that "Greenoaks was *filled*...with drug merchants...".

Some participants were also exposed to substance abuse and gang-related activities within their family environment: Steven's and Liam's fathers were both alcoholics and Peter's father was a drug addict. Peter's father and brothers, Luke's father and Liam's brother were also involved in gang-related activities. They acknowledged that the environment in which they grew up may have contributed to their delinquent behaviour: Steven discussed how youth tend to model the behaviour of their parents and family members and "what [they] see in [their] communities". A resilience-building intervention might therefore include positive role models for young people, such as is offered by mentoring programs (DuBois & Neville, 1997).

For many of the participants it appears that the experience of childhood difficulties contributed to their substance abuse and criminality (Anda et al., 2006; Tiet et al., 2010). Gary discussed how his mother left him to be raised by an abusive uncle. He felt that he "wasn't

receiving…that father figure love" from his uncle, and ran away from home. He lived on the streets for roughly a year and was then placed with foster parents. He felt that they were good to him, but his feelings of rejection persisted. He then "end[ed] up with the wrong friends" and amongst them he "felt like this is [his] place". When he was with these friends, he used drugs. Steven also experienced difficulties with his parents who divorced when he began high school:

> Steven: "…there was not a lot of attention…being shift on us at that particular time…and because of…the male mentor not being there, that…absent father…I went into the wrong avenues looking for that…role models…"

As a result Steven, like Gary, sought acceptance elsewhere: he joined a gang soon after his parent's divorce and began taking drugs thereafter.

This theme of wanting acceptance is evident in most of the other participants' stories. Trevor, for example, discussed how he "wanted to *fit* in with [his older friends]. And in order for [him] to fit in [he] had to do certain things with them". The participants' desire to be accepted by delinquent peers appears to have contributed to their substance abuse and criminal behaviour - associating with delinquent peers is a risk factor for drug use and criminality (Esbenson et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 2000; Kliewer & Murrelle, 2007; Palermo, 2009; Tiet et al., 2010; De La Rosa et al., 2005). What this may indicate is that youth need to be encouraged to associate with more competent peers.

Luke also experienced childhood difficulties: his father was murdered when he was six years old and Luke felt that the event "play[ed] a big role in [his]…going onto drugs". Losing a parent can be very traumatic for youth and can contribute to delinquent behaviour (Ellis & Granger, 2002). What is clear is that these men lacked effective parenting in their lives which contributed to their substance use and criminality (Hawkins et al., 2000; Xiamong et al., 2002). Parents play an important role in their children's lives, and engagement by parents has been found to reduce the frequency of behavioural problems, criminal activities and substance use amongst youth (Leidy et al., 2011; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2004). Support for parents to help them parent effectively may also be a key part of preventive interventions.

Schooling is another key institution in children's development. A lack of commitment to school has been identified as a risk factor for substance abuse and delinquent behaviour (Esbenson et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 2000; Kliewer & Murrelle, 2007; Palermo, 2009). The majority of the participants in this study either left school or were expelled, but they were nonetheless intelligent students. Peter, for example, stated that he was "an A student". Academic competence has been found as a protective mechanism in resilience to antisocial behaviour (Mescheke & Patterson, 2003; Moffit, 1993; Stoiber & Good, 1998). This particular sample, therefore, presents with an interesting contrast. It is possible that they became so deeply involved with drug and crime-related activities that their academic competence was not able to act as a protective factor at that time – a notion that is deserving of further study.

It appears that a lack of positive role models, the experience of childhood difficulties, associating with delinquent peers, ineffective parenting and low levels of commitment to school, all contributed to the participants' involvement with substance abuse and criminality.

Turning away from substance abuse and criminality

Most participants reflected on the negative consequences their drug-taking began to have on their lives. Andrew, for example, mentioned how he "hit rock bottom" as a result of his drug abuse: recognising the negative impact of drug abuse is an important aspect of the resilience process (Mohatt et al., 2007; Stajduhar et al., 2009).

The participants' stories indicate that another important aspect of the resilience process

may be a desire to change that is triggered by certain events, also identified in previous studies as an important aspect of resilience (Stajduhar et al., 2009). Events that might motivate an individual to stop using drugs (Mohatt et al., 2007; Tebes, Irish, Puglisi Vasquez, & Perkins, 2004) were strongly related, in this cohort, to their quitting drugs and crime. Peter lost three friends to murder. After discussing this he stated, "So I thought no…I'm getting out of this, this is the *last* now…". Trevor became involved with a gang member who, after some time, wished to make Trevor a member. Trevor noted that he was not "keen for that", and "that was the breaking point" for him. Liam became a father and he "found [him]self not having a cent…for [his] boy" and decided "ya I must do something".

Common themes that emerge from the above discussion are those of self-reflection and the development of a personal sense of control and choice; Peter, Trevor and Liam all realised the negative consequences of their substance misuse and delinquency, which seemed to trigger a desire to actively make changes within their lives. This echoes previous literature on resilience (Mohatt et al., 2007; Stajduhar, Funk, Shaw, Bottorff, & Johnson, 2009; Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, & D'Ambrosio, 2001). As Luke noted in his interview, "…those people that want to come right, they come right". Given that those intervening amongst delinquent youth are unlikely to be aware of when the individual makes a decision to change, repeated intervention attempts are important.

Another common theme that emerged from the participant's stories is the importance of social support in turning away from substance abuse and criminality (Mohatt et al., 2007; Stajduhar et al., 2009; Todis et al., 2001). For example, Trevor turned to his aunt, Liam to his mother, for help. For some participants, effective social support came from their communities. Peter and Luke were both motivated to stop using drugs after they attended a church service which appeared to speak directly to their situation:

Peter: So they ask like, "Is there anyone that really wanna make a change in their life and like, really feel that you wanna give up"…So I like…this is exactly what I'm going through like, this can't be man…

After hearing this Peter went forward and "committed his life to God", after which he joined the Riverdale substance abuse program. Luke, like Peter, also joined the same program after attending a church service which had a significant impact on him. Luke was motivated by the fact that the minister who gave the service was a recovered drug addict, and he noted that "this man changed so there is a possibility to change". For Richard it appears that this role-modelling effect was also the case. He discussed how a friend "who's come out of the same…system" had made a change in his life and this motivated him to change. What this finding points to is the importance of ensuring that those who wish to disengage from substance misuse and criminality have access to adequate social support and positive role models.

Religious beliefs and practices can be an important aspect of resilience to substance abuse (Meschke & Patterson, 2003; Mohatt et al., 2007). All the participants in this study described religion as a key part in their disengagement from substance abuse and criminality. Andrew, for example, discussed how upon joining a substance abuse program he had a spiritual encounter with God where he experienced a "total mind shift". Richard described how he gives talks to prison inmates and that he "go[es] with the message that there *is* a way out [of gang involvement], but with God". The participants' identification with religious beliefs is not surprising, since they now work for a faith-based organisation, but it does suggest that faith-based organisations may be able to play an encouraging role in disengaging youth from substance abuse and criminality.

A further way of turning away from substance abuse and criminality may be through occupying prosocial adult roles: job stability and strong marital attachment inhibit criminal and deviant behaviour (Sampson & Laub, 1990). In this study, Richard discussed how if a gang member "find[s] [him]self [a] job and get[s] married" the other members will

generally respect this decision. Offenders taking the "adolescent-limited path" tend to possess adequate social skills, academic competence and the ability to forge close relationships (Moffit, 1993). The participants in this study reflect this: some of them are married, they are all actively involved in their communities, several described their academic competence, they are currently employed and appeared (from the descriptions of several participants) to have leadership skills (also indicated by the senior roles they employed within their gangs). This may indicate the importance of developing these sorts of skills in youth who are at risk for engaging in antisocial activities.

Clearly, participants' desire to change was triggered by pivotal events in their lives. Self-reflection, actively making a decision to change, social support, religious beliefs and academic, leadership and social skills all played a role in their disengagement from delinquency.

Staying on track

Some of the participants ended their interviews by discussing current challenges they are facing. Gary, for example, wishes to mend his relationship with his foster parents:

> Gary: …as I learned in the program… about restorative justice. That, it's not about, being forgive[n]…it's about letting them know, that you did it and, allowing them to…giving them… that space man.

Gary has started to address this by regularly communicating with his parents and helping them to understand his past drug addiction. For him, the effects of the treatment program are still unfolding. Similarly, Luke discussed how the substance abuse program gave him the necessary "tools" to overcome the obstacles he experienced after stopping drugs. What this points to is the importance of having an effective substance abuse program that equips ex-drug addicts to handle the challenges they may face even after treatment.

Most of the participants expressed a desire to give back to their communities. Andrew stated how "[his] passion today is helping others out there". Helping others may be an important factor in former drug addicts' and criminals' recovery (Kahn & Stephen, 1981). This giving to others also created a restraining network: Liam discussed how if he were to go back to drug and gang involvement he would be disappointing a lot of people because "[he's] actually the guy that encourage[s] others…a lot of them believe in [his] past…". The fact that others are dependent on Liam appears to give him a sense of purpose and help him manage temptations to relapse. What this points to is the importance of ensuring that youth who used to engage in antisocial behaviour are encouraged to become involved in prosocial activities and to develop a prosocial network.

Receiving effective substance abuse treatment which equips members with the "tools" to deal with any difficulties they may face after treatment ends, is an important factor in helping people maintain prosocial lifestyles. They should also be offered opportunities to become actively involved in their community by helping others.

CONCLUSION

While a narrative research design privileges the perspective of the narrator, interpretation by the researcher cannot be avoided and it is therefore important for the researcher to review her role in the research process (Riessman, 1993; Willig, 2008). The principal investigator in this study is a white, middle class female from a university who interviewed predominantly coloured[1], working class males. Andrew seemed to implicitly acknowledge her academic position as within his interview he discussed how he turned to substance use in an attempt to "numb [his] senses" to

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[1] "Coloured" (mixed race) was a racial category defined by apartheid legislation in South Africa, and which continues to affect health and other outcomes.

"subconscious" and "conscious" problems. Richard acknowledged her race: he discussed how during apartheid he and other gang members would steal money to support their drug habit, and that "it seem[ed] right to steal from, uh, with all respect from the white people". The interviewer's race and status may, therefore, have had some influence on how the interviewees told their stories.

Given that possible (though unavoidable) limitation, this narrative analysis has shown how experiences of adversity contribute to delinquent behaviour. It has also shed light on the resilience process: it has shown that these participants disengaged from substance abuse and criminal behaviour by actively navigating their way towards more health-sustaining behaviours. This involved drawing on both resources within themselves and within their environment.

This exploration of resilience could inform future research. It would be interesting to explore the narratives of youth who have disengaged from delinquent behaviour and who are of a different faith, class and ethnicity, and also the narratives of those who have gone through non-faith-based substance abuse programs, to explore similarities and differences. Future research could also explore the narratives of women and girls who have disengaged from delinquency.

The stories these men shared demonstrate that having family members who are drug addicts and/or gang members, the experience of childhood difficulties, ineffective parenting, association with delinquent peers and a lack of school commitment all contributed to these men becoming involved with substance abuse and criminality. Their stories also demonstrate that the resilience process involves reflection on the negative impact of drug abuse and criminal activities, and the development of a personal sense of control and choice in which the individual realises their desire to change and actively makes changes. Factors which helped these individuals make a change are academic, social and leadership skills, religious beliefs, social support and encouragement from ex-drug addicts and gang members. Their stories

also show that maintaining a prosocial lifestyle is supported by having an effective substance abuse program and giving back to others.

These findings highlight the importance of ensuring youth have access to positive role models and adequate support and that they are encouraged to associate with prosocial peers. It also highlights the importance of providing parenting skills workshops and social and leadership skills training, within communities facing adversity. Interventions amongst delinquent youth need to be offered repeatedly, so as to capitalise on the moment when potential participants wish to change. Intervention programs need to provide their participants with skills training that will enable them to manage challenges they may face, and the skills to be able to "give back" to their communities. Delinquent youth could also be encouraged to become involved with faith-based organisations (although their role vis-à-vis other community-based organisations needs further investigation).

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