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RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR FAMILY RESILIENCE: RESILIENCE PROCESSES ADOPTED BY FAMILIES LIVING IN ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

This study explores the resilience processes of low-income families in Mamelodi, South Africa, a context of profound economic adversity. Through qualitative Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) workshops with 96 caregivers, the research identifies that family resilience is a dynamic achievement, negotiated through the interaction of variable relational processes and stable foundational strengths. Key findings reveal that positive communication, collaborative problem-solving, and supportive relationships are critical yet vulnerable protective factors that can easily become risks under pressure; conversely, religion/spirituality and shared family beliefs serve as a stable, cultural anchor providing meaning and hope. The pervasive risk of low socio-economic status consistently threatens this balance, exerting a destabilizing force on family functioning. The study concludes that resilience is an active process where families leverage their foundational beliefs to protect their relational bonds, challenging deficit narratives and highlighting the need for interventions that combine economic support with culturally congruent strengthening of family processes.

Keywords: Resilience, Risk, Protection, Poverty, Communication, Spirituality, Ubuntu, Community, Adaptation, Process

1. Introduction

Families residing in economically depressed environments are frequently characterised by a confluence of significant challenges. Research consistently demonstrates that low-income households are overrepresented in statistics about inadequate resources, substandard shelter, food insecurity, unemployment, limited access to healthcare, and exposure to crime (Wall et al., 2020). These multifarious risk factors are intrinsically linked to economic precarity, which critically impairs family functioning as caregivers struggle to meet basic needs (Trisi et al., 2011; South African Reserve Bank [SARB], 2021).

While all families navigate problems, those of low socio-economic status (SES) are disproportionately burdened by poverty and often experience social and community isolation (Yang et al., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has starkly exacerbated these pre-existing global inequalities. In South Africa, lockdown measures precipitated widespread job losses, pushing the national poverty rate to 55% and disproportionately affecting Black South Africans, whose unemployment rate soared to 63.2% (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2021; Kartseva & Kuznetsova, 2020). This has intensified economic hardship and widened the chasm of resource disparity between high- and low-income families.

Communities like Mamelodi township exemplify these challenges. Characterized by high population density and widespread impoverishment, residents face profound barriers in accessing social services, employment, and training opportunities (Mudau & Mhangara, 2021; Ruane, 2010). The accumulation of these stressors can lead to increased psychological distress and diminished well-being among family members (Xiao et al., 2020). In contrast, higher-SES families often benefit from a robust infrastructure of support, including better policing, mental health care, and educational resources, which facilitate greater resilience and opportunity (Payne, 2018; Lindsey, 2008).

Despite these entrenched and often traumatising inequalities, a significant number of economically disadvantaged families demonstrate remarkable resilience. Contrary to deficit-based narratives, many such families successfully keep their children in school, maintain stable households, and engage their children in developmentally appropriate activities (Walsh, 2016; Dickinson & Adams, 2014). This evidence underscores the necessity of moving beyond a sole focus on risks and pathologies to understanding the sources of strength, adaptability, and resilience that enable positive adaptation.

Resilience is defined as a developmental process leading to successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Masten, 2015; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). While historically focused on individuals, the concept has rightly been expanded to the family system (Walsh, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Family resilience refers to the capacity of a family to withstand and rebound from adversity through transactional processes that foster mutual support, collaborative problem-solving, and a shared belief system (Walsh, 2016). It is evident that when a family not only endures significant risk but also emerges more cohesive, resourceful, and strengthened (Black & Lobo, 2008).

Families that confront difficulties collectively are more likely to achieve positive outcomes, with warmth, connectedness, and togetherness being strong predictors of children's academic success and prospects (Orthner et al., 2014; Trisi et al., 2011). Social support from community institutions and networks is another critical protective factor, buffering the impact of common stressors (Ungar, 2011; Masarik & Conger, 2017). Furthermore, family spirituality, religiosity, and deeply held cultural belief systems provide a framework for making meaning of adversity, fostering a sense of purpose, and promoting cohesion (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Walsh, 2012).

However, while research on general risk and protective factors for family resilience is established, the specific resilience processes employed by families in sustained economically depressed environments remain underexplored (Buheji, 2020). Given the South African Reserve Bank's (2021) projection of a prolonged economic recovery, understanding these processes is more critical than ever. This study, therefore, aims to explore the lived experiences of low-income families in Mamelodi, South Africa, to investigate the specific risk and protective factors that characterise their resilience processes. The research is guided by the question: *What are the resilience processes that help South African families from a low socio-economic background overcome adversities?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Perspectives on Family Resilience

The concept of resilience has evolved from a focus on individual traits to a dynamic, process-oriented understanding situated within ecological systems (Masten, 2015; Ungar, 2011). Family resilience, consequently, is not viewed as a static attribute but as the capacity of a family system to navigate and adapt to adversity through interactive processes (Walsh, 2016, 2021). This global perspective emphasises that resilience is forged within the crucible of shared challenges, where families mobilise resources to foster positive adaptation and even post-traumatic growth.

A robust body of international literature identifies common protective factors that underpin family resilience. Walsh's (2016) seminal framework organizes these into three key domains: (1) Family Belief Systems (making meaning of adversity, maintaining a positive outlook, and transcendence/spirituality); (2) Organizational Patterns (flexibility, connectedness, and social and economic resources); and (3) Communication Processes (clarity, open emotional expression, and collaborative problem-solving). These factors are consistently identified across diverse contexts as buffers against risks such as economic hardship, illness, and disaster (Prime et al., 2020; Masten & Monn, 2015). For instance, collaborative problem-solving and clear communication allow families to appraise threats realistically and mobilise collective action, while strong social networks provide tangible and emotional support that mitigates the impact of stressors (Ungar, 2011; Theiss, 2018).

2.2 The African Context: Ubuntu and Communal Resilience

The application of Western-centric models of resilience to African contexts often overlooks fundamental cultural and philosophical differences. The African worldview is often characterised by a collectivist ethos, most famously encapsulated in the Southern African concept of *Ubuntu* – "I am because we are" (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Semenya & Mokoena, 2012). This philosophy places the community, rather than the individual or even the nuclear family, at the centre of human existence and, by extension, resilience.

Within this framework, family is frequently extended beyond biological ties to include a broad kinship network and community (Mji, 2019). Resilience processes are therefore deeply embedded in communal practices and interdependencies. The role of ancestors, elders, and community rituals in providing guidance, support, and a sense of cultural continuity is a critical protective factor often absent from Western models (Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Spirituality and religiosity are not merely private beliefs but are woven into the fabric of daily life and are a primary mechanism for making meaning of suffering and fostering hope (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Schwalm et al., 2021). As such, the unit of analysis for "family resilience" in many African settings must be expanded to include the wider community and spiritual ecosystem that actively participates in the family's adaptive processes.

2.4 The South African Nexus: Poverty, Inequality, and Resilience

South Africa presents a unique and critical case study for examining family resilience. The enduring legacy of apartheid, characterised by systematic racial discrimination, spatial segregation, and economic disenfranchisement, has created a society with one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world (Stats SA, 2021). For most Black South African families, economic deprivation is not a temporary setback but a persistent, intergenerational reality (Amoateng & Richter, 2007).

The literature on South African families living in poverty extensively documents the overwhelming risk factors such as chronic unemployment, food insecurity, inadequate housing, high rates of crime and violence, and a burden of disease exacerbated by HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 (Landsberg et al., 2011; SARB, 2021). These compounds to create what has been termed "toxic stress," which can disrupt family functioning and parenting practices, leading to negative outcomes for children (Masarik & Conger, 2017).

However, a growing strand of research focuses on the protective factors that enable survival and thriving against these odds. Studies have found that South African families demonstrate remarkable resilience through:

Extended Family and Social Networks: The reliance on grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even non-kin community members for childcare, financial support, and emotional sustenance is a fundamental adaptive strategy (Mahlase & Ntombela, 2011; Tchombe et al., 2012).

Spirituality and Church Communities: As in broader Africa, religious faith and active participation in church communities provide not only existential comfort but also very practical social support, networking opportunities, and material aid (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Ruane, 2010).

Informal Support Structures: Community-based initiatives like the drop-in centre in this study, stokvels (savings clubs), and burial societies act as crucial buffers, filling gaps left by inadequate state support (Hall & Cheston, 2002; Spring et al., 2019).

While the general risk and protective factors are increasingly documented, there is a paucity of research that delves into the *everyday processes* through which these factors are activated and negotiated by families in sustained economically depressed environments (Buheji, 2020; Maurović et al., 2020). Much of the South African literature remains focused on either cataloguing adversities or listing static resources. The dynamic, transactional nature of resilience *how* beliefs translate into communication, *how* spirituality influences problem-solving, and *how* economic pressure strains relational bonds is less understood.

This study addresses this gap by employing a participatory methodology to explore the lived experiences of families in Mamelodi. It seeks to understand resilience not as a list of assets but as a process enacted through the "proximal processes" of daily family life. By focusing on a specific, high-risk South African township context, this research aims to contribute a nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of family resilience that honours both the universal principles outlined in global frameworks and the unique manifestations of those principles within the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and the harsh socio-economic reality of post-apartheid South Africa.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework that combines Family Resilience Theory (Walsh, 2016) and Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The combination of these two perspectives provides a comprehensive lens for analysing the findings, as it accounts for both the internal transactional processes within the family unit and the profound influence of the broader external environment. This dual focus is essential for understanding resilience in a context defined by pervasive economic and social adversity.

2.5.1 Family Resilience Theory: A Strength-Based Lens

The primary lens for this research is Walsh's (2016) Family Resilience Theory. This framework represents a paradigm shift from a pathological, deficit-based view of families in crisis towards a strength-based perspective that focuses on adaptive processes and the potential for positive growth. Walsh (2016, p. 16) conceptualises family resilience as "the capacity of the family system to withstand and rebound from adversity," emerging not merely intact but strengthened and more resourceful.

The theory organizes the key processes that foster this capacity into three interrelated domains (Walsh, 2016). The first domain is Family Belief Systems, which encompasses the shared meanings a family constructs to make sense of adversity. This includes making meaning of hardship, maintaining a positive outlook, and transcendence and spirituality, such as relying on faith or cultural values to see beyond the immediate crisis (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Walsh, 2012). The second domain is Organisational Patterns, which refers to the structure and resources of

the family system. This includes flexibility, or the ability to adapt to roles and rules; connectedness, meaning mutual support and commitment; and social and economic resources, which involve mobilising both internal and external supports (Ungar, 2011). The third domain is Communication Processes, which entails how the family interacts to process information and emotion. This includes clarity, or open and honest communication; open emotional expression; and collaborative problem-solving (Theiss, 2018; Walsh, 2016).

This framework is directly applicable to the present study as it provides a structured vocabulary to categorise and analyse the protective and risk factors identified by the participants, moving beyond a simple listing of variables to an understanding of their dynamic functioning within the family unit.

2.5.2 Bioecological Systems Theory: Contextualising the Family

While Walsh's theory provides an essential focus on the internal family system, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory is indispensable for contextualising the family within its broader environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This theory posits that human development is shaped by a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment. For the families in Mamelodi, the adversities they face are not isolated incidents but are deeply embedded within larger socio-economic and historical systems (Landsberg et al., 2011; Stats SA, 2021).

The theory outlines several levels of the ecosystem that are critically relevant to this study. The microsystem includes the immediate environments with which the family interacts directly, such as the household, the extended family, the school, the local church, and the drop-in centre (Mahlase & Ntombela, 2011). The mesosystem involves the interconnections between these microsystems, for example, the relationship between the drop-in centre and the parents (Ungar, Theron & Murphy, 2023). The exosystem comprises external environments that indirectly influence the family, such as parental workplace policies, local government services, and social welfare systems (Prime et al, 2021). *Family*. The macrosystem is the overarching cultural, economic, and political context, including the national history of apartheid, prevailing economic inequality, cultural values of *Ubuntu*, and national social policies (Amoateng & Richter, 2007; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). Finally, the chronosystem adds the dimension of time, encompassing socio-historical conditions and life transitions, such as the enduring impact of apartheid and the recent economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic (SARB, 2021; van Breda et al, 2025).

This ecological lens is crucial for understanding why low socio-economic status was identified by participants as such a potent and stable risk factor, as it illustrates how macroeconomic forces and inadequate social safety nets create chronic stressors that penetrate the core of family life (Masarik & Conger, 2017).

2.5.3 An Integrated Theoretical Lens for Understanding Resilience

The integration of these two theories creates a multi-layered analytical framework for this study. Walsh's (2016) theory provides the internal vocabulary to describe the family's own adaptive processes, effectively answering what and *how* of their resilience. Concurrently, Bronfenbrenner's theory provides the external map to locate the family and understand the origin and persistence of the adversities they face, answering the *why* and *where* of their challenges (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

This integrated approach acknowledges that a family's capacity for resilience is not developed in isolation but is forged through a continuous transaction between its internal processes, its beliefs, organisation, and communication and the multiple, often oppressive, layers of its external ecosystem (Bosire et al, 2022). This framework directly supports the central finding of this study that factors like relationships, communication, and problem-solving exist on a continuum their positive or negative expression is heavily mediated by the immense pressure exerted by the broader economic and social context (Christodoulou et al, 2022). Conversely, it also explains how stable internal factors, such as spirituality and deeply held family beliefs, can provide a critical buffer against these external pressures (Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011; Ungar, 2015).

In essence, this theoretical framework posits that family resilience in an economically depressed environment is best understood as the product of a family's active efforts to nurture key internal processes while simultaneously navigating the significant constraints and leveraging the limited resources offered by their specific ecological context.

3. Method

This section outlines the research design, paradigm, participants, data collection instruments, procedures, ethical considerations, and data analysis strategies employed to investigate the resilience processes of families in Mamelodi.

3.1 Research Approach and Paradigmatic Perspective

This study adopted a qualitative research approach situated within an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism posits that reality is socially constructed and subjective, and that knowledge is gained through understanding the meanings people assign to their experiences (Chan et al., 2016). This paradigm is appropriate as the study sought to understand the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of caregivers regarding their family's resilience.

Within this paradigm, a phenomenological research design was employed. Phenomenology is concerned with the detailed study of human experience, and the meanings individuals derive from their lived world (Langdridge, 2007; Qutoshi, 2018). The aim was to explore and describe the essence of the phenomenon of "family resilience" as experienced by the participants in their specific context, without any prior assumptions or disturbances to their natural setting.

3.2 Research Method and Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) Workshops

To gather rich, interactive, and reflective data, the study utilised Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) workshops. PRA is a community-based participatory method that facilitates collaborative learning and analysis between the researcher and participants (Chambers, 2012; Halskov & Hansen, 2015). This method was selected for its suitability in resource-limited communities, as it values local knowledge, promotes empowerment, and allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own words rather than being constrained by predetermined numerical scales (Jernigan & Jacob, 2015).

Four separate PRA workshops were conducted with caregivers whose children attended an after-school drop-in centre in Mamelodi. The purpose of these workshops was to explore the challenges of living in an economically depressed environment and to identify the specific resilience enablers families rely on to thrive.

3.3 Research Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 96 participants. All participants were adult parents or primary caregivers of children who received support at the drop-in centre. Purposive sampling was appropriate as it allowed for the selection of information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon under study, individuals who had direct experience with the challenges and adaptive strategies of raising a family in an economically depressed context.

As captured in the attendance registers, the participants' ages ranged from 31 to 90 years old. The majority of participants were female (n=84), with only three male participants and nine participants who did not indicate their gender. To ensure confidentiality and ethical reporting, each participant is referred to in the findings using a pseudonym (e.g., P1-W1, P2-W3). The code denotes the participant number and the workshop they attended (e.g., P12-W4 is the twelfth participant from Workshop 4).

Table 1: Sample Size of the PRA Workshops

Research method	**Sample size**	**Description of sample**
PRA Workshop 1	18	Caregivers/Parents
PRA Workshop 2	20	Caregivers/Parents
PRA Workshop 3	28	Caregivers/Parents
PRA Workshop 4	30	Caregivers/Parents
Total sample	**96**	

3.4 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

The primary data collection instruments were the PRA workshop activities and an attendance register. The register was used to capture basic demographic information (age, gender) at each workshop.

The PRA workshop activities were designed based on the research questions and a review of the literature on family resilience (Burton et al., 2008). Activities were structured to encourage deep reflection and sharing. Examples included:

1. Resource Mapping: Participants collaboratively drew maps of their community, identifying key sources of support and risk.
2. Problem Tree Analysis: Participants identified a core challenge (the trunk), its root causes (roots), and its effects (branches), followed by a discussion of solutions (the fruit).
3. Strength Cards: Participants discussed pre-prepared cards listing potential strengths (e.g., "prayer," "talking together," "support from family") and ranked their importance for their family's survival.

Before commencing, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria ethics committee, and permission was granted by the drop-in centre management. A pre-workshop meeting was held with prospective

participants to explain the study's objectives, benefits, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained in writing before the start of each workshop.

With participants' permission, all workshop sessions were audio-recorded to capture the discussions verbatim. Extensive field notes were taken by the researcher and two trained assistants to document non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and contextual observations. A reflective research diary was maintained throughout the process to record the researcher's initial impressions and methodological reflections, adding to the audit trail and rigour of the study.

3.5 Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the audio recordings and field notes were transcribed verbatim and analysed using inductive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019).

1. Familiarisation with the Data: The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Significant features of the data were systematically coded across the entire dataset.
3. Searching for Themes: The codes were collated into potential overarching themes that captured important patterns in the data.
4. Reviewing Themes: The potential themes were checked against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they formed a coherent pattern.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: The essence of each theme was refined, and clear names and definitions were generated for each.
6. Producing the Report: The analysis was woven into a narrative report, supported by vivid, compelling extract examples.

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, a process of cross-validation was employed. Three independent coders familiar with qualitative analysis were engaged. The first and second coders met after each workshop to compare and discuss their initial codes. Any discrepancies or disagreements in coding or thematic identification were referred to a third coder. This third coder, blinded to the choices of the first two, assessed the disputed data extracts and assigned a final category, thereby reducing researcher bias and increasing the validity of the identified themes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to the highest ethical standards. Ethical approval was granted by the University's Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits were explained. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed; all identifiers were removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms (e.g., P1-W1) are used throughout this report. The data is stored securely on a password-protected computer, and audio recordings will be destroyed five years after the publication of the research.

4. Findings

Thematic analysis of the data revealed that family resilience is not a fixed state but a dynamic process, continually negotiated through the interaction between protective factors and risk factors. The findings are presented in two main sections: first, the key protective factors that facilitate resilience, and second, the primary risk factors that threaten it. A critical finding was that several factors are bidirectional; their positive expression protects the family, while their negative expression poses a significant risk. The data culminates in a conceptual model that illustrates this process.

4.1. Pathways to Protection: Key Facilitators of Family Resilience

Participants described five core processes that enable families to withstand adversity and function effectively.

4.1.1. Relational Scaffolding: Positive Family Relationships

Strong, supportive relationships were the most frequently cited source of resilience. These relationships, characterized by love, respect, and forgiveness, provide essential emotional and practical sustenance.

Understanding each other and respect and love... Do not compare your husband with the neighbour's husband..." (Participant 14, Workshop 1).

"We must love each other at all times, forgive each other if we have made mistakes... A family is strengthened by love." (Participant 2, Workshop 3).

"A home is a place of safety where you find the love and comfort of your parents." (Participant 6, Workshop 2).

"In times of trouble a supportive family will not air their dirty linen for everyone to see, they protect each other..." (Participant 11, Workshop 4).

4.1.2. The Clarity of Connection: Effective Communication

Open, honest, and respectful communication was identified as the bedrock for resolving conflict, making joint decisions, and maintaining emotional connection. It involves clarity, emotional expression, and a commitment to truthfulness.

"Good communication, understanding, thanking each other, forgiving each other are one of the things that create a decent home." (Participant 7, Workshop 2).

"Communication is key to any family, do not bear grudges, if there's a problem discuss it and end the discussion with forgiveness on both sides." (Participant 12, Workshop 1).

"We must not lie to our children, we must tell them the truth. Even if the truth hurts... No matter how bad the situation, we must be able to tell it as it is." (Participant 3, Workshop 4).

4.1.3. Collective Efficacy: Collaborative Problem-Solving

The ability to face challenges collectively, rather than individually, was a defining feature of resilient families. This process involves gathering, discussing, agreeing on a path forward, and offering mutual support in implementation.

"We all sit around the table and discuss the problem and reach a conclusion. After discussions we forgive and forget... from thereon we revive our love and continue loving each other." (Participant 5, Workshop 3).

"When you have family problems, sit down and talk about them and find a way forward together." (Participant 9, Workshop 1).

"You cannot get into your bed to sleep before you solve your problems... You have so many problems building up in you and this can destroy a family." (Participant 17, Workshop 4).

4.1.4. The Pillars of Meaning: Family Beliefs and Religion/Spirituality

These two factors were consistently identified as the most stable and foundational protective factors, providing a framework for making meaning of suffering and fostering hope.

Faith was a paramount buffer, providing solace, guidance, and a sense of community.

"A family needs to pray together at all times for God to guide the family and be present with the family at all times." (Participant 1, Workshop 3).

"It is important to believe in the Lord and pray to make your family strong." (Participant 8, Workshop 4).

Shared cultural values and worldview helped families normalise crises and view them as manageable within a larger, meaningful context.

4.2. Threats to Resilience: Factors that Undermine Family Functioning

Participants were equally articulate about the factors that erode family cohesion, many of which represent the negative pole of the protective factors.

4.2.1. Relational Erosion: Negative Communication and Dysfunctional Relationships

When communication and relationships break down, they become significant sources of risk and conflict.

"Not listening when the other one is talking." (Participant 15, Workshop 1); *"Swearing at each other at all times also breaks a family."* (Participant 4, Workshop 2).

"Looking down on each other and less respect. Having extra marital affairs." (Participant 5, Workshop 1); *"Gossip, listening to other people discussing your partner and lack of trust can break a family."* (Participant 9, Workshop 4).

"Some parents were brought up in abusive families, when they start having children of their own, they transfer their anger to their own children..." (Participant 12, Workshop 3).

4.2.2. The Central Role of Socio-Economic Status

Unlike the relational factors, low socio-economic status, particularly unemployment and poverty, was identified as a stable, pervasive, and underlying risk factor that exacerbates all other vulnerabilities.

"If both parents are unemployed, the family will have challenges... the parents' weaknesses are no longer visible." (Participant 2, Workshop 4); *"Some women, if their husbands are no longer working, they treat their husbands badly..."* (Participant 10, Workshop 1).

"Poverty is bad... we are all lucky because we get groceries from social workers... unlike the street kids who sleep in the streets with no food, no shelter." (Participant 19, Workshop 3).

4.3. Synthesis: The Dual Nature of Resilience Processes

A central finding of this study is the dual nature of core resilience processes. The data suggests a clear hierarchy and relationship between factors:

Stable Foundational Factors: Religion/Spirituality and Family Beliefs were perceived as stable, independent protective factors, providing a consistent foundation.

Variable Relational Processes: Communication, Collaborative Problem-Solving, and Relationships were identified as variables; their positive expression protected the family, while their negative expression posed a severe risk.

The Contextual Overlay: The Low Socio-Economic environment acts as a constant, pervasive stressor that exerts pressure on the family system, making it more difficult to maintain the variable relational processes in their positive state.

Resilience, therefore, is an active, transactional process where families must consciously commit to maintaining positive communication, collaboration, and relationships to buffer the constant pressure of economic adversity and fully leverage their foundational strengths in faith and shared beliefs.

Table 1: Summary of Risk and Protective Factors for Family Resilience

Factor	Protective Manifestation	Risk Manifestation	Nature
Communication	Open, honest, respectful	Poor, destructive, lacking	Variable
Problem-Solving	Collaborative, proactive	Avoidant, individualistic	Variable
Relationships	Supportive, loving, trusting	Dysfunctional, disrespectful	Variable
Religion/Spirituality	Strong faith, prayer, church community	(Largely absent as a risk)	**Stable Protection**
Family Beliefs	Shared meaning, positive outlook	(Largely absent as a risk)	**Stable Protection**
Socio-Economic Status	(Not applicable)	Unemployment, poverty	**Stable Risk**

5. Discussion

This study sought to explore the resilience processes adopted by families living in the economically depressed environment of Mamelodi. The findings reveal that family resilience is not a mere inventory of assets but a dynamic, transactional process, continually negotiated between internal family processes and external socio-economic pressures. This discussion interprets these findings through the integrated lens of Walsh's (2016) Family Resilience Framework and Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Systems Theory, situating them within both the global and specific South African context.

5.1. The Relational Core of Resilience: A Variable Equilibrium

The identification of communication, collaborative problem-solving, and relationships as bidirectional factors is a crucial finding. This aligns perfectly with Walsh's (2016) domains of organisational patterns and communication processes, which are posited as fundamental to adaptive family functioning. However, this study adds a critical nuance: these are not stable traits but are in a variable equilibrium, highly susceptible to contextual stress (Durr & Greeff, 2020).

Participants' narratives confirmed that positive communication characterized by clarity, emotional honesty, and respect (Theiss, 2018; Walsh, 2012) is a facilitating dimension for resilience. Conversely, its absence or negative expression became a primary source of risk. This duality underscores that these processes are the *active work* of resilience; they require continuous effort and commitment from all family members. Their success is "relational," dependent on the attitudes and interactions between individuals, making them vulnerable to breakdown under strain, a finding that echoes the family stress model proposed by Masarik and Conger (2017).

5.2. The Foundational Bedrock: Stable Protective Factors in a Hostile Macrosystem

In contrast to the variable relational processes, religion/spirituality and family beliefs emerged as stable, foundational protective factors. Participants viewed them as "independent of the intensity of adversity." This finding strongly supports Walsh's (2012) belief system domain, where making meaning, maintaining a positive outlook, and transcendence are key.

The profound role of religiosity, specifically through church communities, extends beyond individual comfort (Monakedi, 2020). It provides a vital mesosystemic link (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), connecting the family (microsystem) to a wider support network that offers both tangible and emotional resources (Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011; Schwalm et al., 2021). This aligns with the African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu*, where identity and support are derived from the collective (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). Similarly, shared family beliefs, often rooted in cultural values, help normalise suffering and provide a coherent narrative to navigate hardship, which is a known buffer against trauma (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011).

These stable factors appear to function as an anchor, providing a sense of purpose and hope that persists even when relational processes are strained by external pressures.

5.3. The Pervasive Threat: Low Socio-Economic Status as a Macrosystemic Risk

The consistent identification of low socio-economic status (SES) as a stable risk factor underscores the powerful influence of the macrosystem and exosystem on family life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This finding is well-documented in the literature; poverty creates chronic, toxic stress that depletes psychological resources and strains interpersonal relationships (Conger et al., 2010; Payne, 2018).

This study provides a vivid, on-the-ground confirmation of this dynamic. Participants explicitly described how unemployment and poverty lead to shame, conflict ("*they treat their husbands badly*"), and a reliance on external aid. This aligns with national statistics showing deep structural inequality and high unemployment disproportionately affecting Black South African communities (Stats SA, 2021). The data illustrate how this macrosystemic reality directly infiltrates the microsystem of the family, potentially triggering negative communication, eroding relationships, and hindering collaborative problem-solving. It is the constant, overwhelming background against which the drama of family resilience plays out.

5.4. An Integrated Model of Resilience in Context

Therefore, the findings can be synthesized into an integrated model of family resilience for communities like Mamelodi:

The Macrosystemic Pressure: The low-SES context exerts a constant, destabilizing pressure on the family system.

The Relational Mediation: This pressure directly impacts the variable relational processes (communication, problem-solving, relationships), challenging the family's ability to maintain them in a positive state.

The Foundational Buffer: The stable, foundational factors of spirituality and family beliefs provide a critical buffer, offering meaning, hope, and external support that helps the family withstand pressure.

The Active Process of Resilience: Resilience is the outcome of the family's active, ongoing effort to protect and nurture its positive relational processes *despite* the macroeconomic pressure, an effort that is sustained by its foundational beliefs.

This model resonates with Ungar's (2011) social ecological view of resilience, which emphasises that resilience is not just the capacity of the individual or family, but the capacity of their environment to provide the necessary resources and supports. In Mamelodi, the church and family belief systems are key providers of that resource.

5.5. Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study's limitations include a sample predominantly comprised of female caregivers, which may skew perspectives on family dynamics. Furthermore, the focus on one township limits the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should actively include male caregivers to gain a more holistic understanding of family resilience processes. Longitudinal studies could track how these processes change over time and in response to specific economic shocks. Finally, research could explore the efficacy of interventions designed to strengthen the specific variable processes (e.g., communication skills workshops) within these high-risk, high-potential communities.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that for families in economically depressed environments, resilience is a hard-won achievement. It is the product of a daily struggle to maintain loving communication, collaborative problem-solving, and strong relationships against a tide of economic adversity a struggle made possible by the unwavering anchor of faith and shared cultural beliefs.

5.6 Recommendations

The findings of this study offer critical insights into the mechanisms of family resilience within economically depressed environments. To translate these insights into meaningful action, specific recommendations are proposed for key stakeholders, including practitioners, policymakers, and the research community.

For practitioners and community-based organizations, the development of targeted family strengthening programs is essential. These initiatives should focus on building skills in communication, collaborative problem-solving, and nurturing positive relationships, which were identified as critical yet variable protective factors. Furthermore, intervention strategies must leverage existing community assets. Given the central role of religiosity, formal partnerships with faith-based organizations provide a culturally congruent and trusted avenue for delivering psychosocial support, thereby amplifying a key stable protective factor.

At the policy level, concerted action is required to address the foundational risk factor of low socio-economic status. Governmental bodies must prioritise sustainable economic development and job creation schemes specifically targeted within townships to alleviate the pervasive financial pressure that destabilises family functioning. Concurrently, policy should aim to strengthen the social safety net by increasing support for and funding of community-based resources, such as the drop-in centre central to this study, which offer direct aid that indirectly bolsters family resilience.

For the research community, future studies should build upon this work through longitudinal and interventional designs. Research is needed to track how resilience processes fluctuate over time and to rigorously test the efficacy of programs designed to enhance specific protective factors. Additionally, subsequent investigations should strive for more inclusive sampling by actively engaging male caregivers and youth to obtain a holistic, multi-generational perspective on family resilience.

The findings from this study will be used to develop a practical framework to guide assessment and intervention by educational psychologists and social workers. This framework will structure evaluation around three core domains: Relational Processes, encompassing communication patterns and problem-solving approaches; Foundational Strengths, including spirituality and family belief systems; and Contextual Factors, focusing on socio-economic pressures and social support networks. This holistic approach ensures that both risks and innate strengths are identified.

6. Conclusions

This study provides a nuanced understanding of family resilience as a dynamic, transactional process forged within the specific context of economic oppression in Mamelodi. The findings move beyond a simplistic inventory of risks and assets to reveal a complex interplay between variable relational processes and stable foundational strengths, all set against a backdrop of pervasive socio-economic adversity.

The research conclusively demonstrates that resilience is not a passive state of being but an active achievement, continually negotiated through the daily practices of communication, collaborative problem-solving, and nurturing relationships. The quality of these processes, whether they function as protective factors or risk factors, is highly susceptible to the immense pressure exerted by poverty and unemployment, as the study identified stable risk. However, this vulnerability is counterbalanced by the profound, stabilising role of religion and family belief systems. These factors provide an unwavering anchor, offering a framework for making meaning of adversity, a source of hope, and a connection to vital community-based support networks.

Ultimately, this portrait of resilience challenges deficit-based narratives about families in low-income contexts. It reveals families actively employing sophisticated strategies to survive and maintain cohesion against formidable odds. Their strength is not defined by the absence of risk but by their capacity to leverage deeply held cultural and spiritual values to protect their relational bonds from the corrosive effects of their economic environment.

Therefore, the imperative for support is clear: effective intervention requires a dual approach. It demands macro-level policy commitments to economic justice and job creation to alleviate the foundational pressures that undermine family functioning. Simultaneously, it requires micro-level practices that are culturally congruent and strength-based, designed in partnership with communities to intentionally fortify the variable processes of communication and problem-solving, while honouring and leveraging the foundational strengths of faith and shared belief that already exist. This integrated approach is essential for moving from simply helping families survive adversity to empowering them to thrive in spite of it.

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