Unapologetically Me – ‘Transcending Resilience’

A report exploring the role of resilience in supporting the well-being of young people with racialised identities¹, from minoritised communities.

Resilience is...

Power/Vulnerability/Strength

Beauty/Love/Pain

A Journey

Being laid bare

Accountability

A process

An experience

Change

Damilola Okanrende
Peer Researcher
‘When I fall to my knees, I convince myself that I’m still running’
Anonymous

When I Fall to My Knees
Carlotta Naima Adams, Peer Researcher

When I fall to my knees
I lay down and see
All the pain inside that keeps surrounding me

I struggle to rise
Don’t know how I’ll survive
Think I need a little more time to breathe

I get lost, then I’m found
Don’t think I’ll get around
The scars this life has left me here to deal with

And I know as I cry
That I’ll be wiser in time
But I still need to get through all the healing

When I Fall to My Knees
Dexter Dare, Peer Researcher
(Inspired by a song called Penelope by Col3trane)

I fell to the floor
Think I had bruises on my knees
I took time to let them heal
Allowed myself to pay the fees
The world is my oyster
My potential deep, just like the sea
Still undiscovered and subtle
Now I can express it freely
I’m overcoming these boulders
Winding through the coral reefs

Foreword

Partnership for Young London (PYL) is a regional youth policy and practice unit offering a range of services, primarily to the voluntary sector. We have worked over the last year to develop our manifesto for the future, full details can be downloaded here. Within this we have three key objectives.

1. To build dynamic partnerships across organisations and networks which are responsive to the emerging needs of young people.

2. To develop a cohesive, cross-sector workforce that is skilled and competent to meet the holistic needs of diverse groups of young people.

3. To advocate and amplify the diverse voices of young Londoners, influencing policy, resourcing and delivery.

Our values are:

Collaborative - We know that change happens when we work together, and we take a systemic approach across our initiatives.

Equity - We believe that tackling inequalities is core to everything we do.

Youth-led - We believe that young people’s contributions are key to our decision-making processes.

1 - We recognise that umbrella terms to describe the ethnicity of individuals and groups is problematic. We chose to use ‘racialised’ and ‘minoritised’ identities to describe what happens to people in the process of categorising them into ethnic groups.
Introduction

Transcending Resilience – A Peer Research Initiative

Unapologetically Me was generously funded by The National Lottery Community Fund. It was a comprehensive programme of activities delivered over a six-month period. It included training, youth-led events and mentoring. It was devised to support young people and colleagues from Black, Asian and other minoritised ethnic groups such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities, through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report focuses on the process and outcomes of one strand of Unapologetically Me called ‘Transcending Resilience’, which was a co-produced, peer research project investigating how young people with racialised identities, from minoritised communities develop resilience.

Transcending Resilience was co-produced with staff from PYL alongside 12 young people, over an eight-week period. We are particularly indebted to the young people we worked with for their commitment, generosity and professionalism.

When I Fall to My Knees
Salem Habtom, Peer Researcher

When I Fall to My Knees
I always find myself
through the reassurance,
that there is a way out.
I can get out.
That is the light,
knowing it is not permanent.
I will eventually
rise again.
Introduction

The overarching aim of Transcending Resilience was to explore what it takes to marshal personal strength in the face of adversity. We also wanted to provide a skills-set to group members that was transferable once the project ended. Additionally, we sought to engender a sense of hope in young people, who committed to making a difference to their peer-group, in these COVID times.

The peer research was initiated in response to existing evidence from reports such as ‘The Impact of COVID-19 on Young People and the Youth Sector’ by UK Youth (Okezie, UK Youth, 2020) and ‘Disparities in the Risks and Outcomes of COVID-19’ by Public Health England (Public Health England, 2020). Both highlighted the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on people from minoritised communities. Data demonstrated this inequality was compounded for young people by additional pressures during lockdown, such as racial profiling, loss of education, soaring unemployment and reduced support networks.

The inequalities of the pandemic were further exacerbated by the systemic racism, brought to global, public attention through social movements like Black Lives Matter, following the murder of George Floyd (Dodd, 2020). These combined factors had a corrosive impact on the emotional wellbeing of young people (#YoungAndBlack, 2020).

The initial intention of our research was to build a picture of the core competencies that form ‘a resilience practice’. However, the outcomes that emerged challenged this premise. Findings from Transcending Resilience examined perceptions of personal strength and collective resistance – told from the perspectives of young people. The stories and observations of contributors should inform future support services, as we move out of the pandemic crisis and into recovery.
Our Methodology

Our methodology involved each participant adopting the dual role of being both ‘the researcher and the research’. The core intention was to create an ethos where sharing and owning aspects of our own stories and learning from the stories of others was held as the highest value. We wanted to create a research opportunity that explored subtleties amongst and between our lives, giving a richer, more complete sense of the impact caused by being compelled to learn the skills of resilience as a means of survival. Integral to this work was centring the voices of women, people with racialised identities from minoritised communities and people from LGBTQ+ communities, in recognition that research and policy development are primarily conducted by ‘an Anglo-Saxon patriarchy and should be person centred and egalitarian’ (Hart, Uniting Resilience Research and Practice With an Inequalities Approach, 2016, p.6). Furthermore, we drew on Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw’s framework of intersectionality to understand how different aspects of our identities overlap and compound oppression.

We devised a model of co-production to conduct our inquiry. Existing evidence from academics, such as Professor Angie Hart from the Centre for Resilience and Social Justice at the University of Brighton, and from former research projects conducted by PYL¹, demonstrate that young people are more invested in social issues of concern when they are part of decision-making processes and supported to take a lead (Hart, 2016). Co-production promotes leadership attributes in all participants and breaks with the hierarchy enmeshed in the traditional roles of ‘the researcher’ and ‘the participant’.
Reflective practice was also a fundamental tenet of our methodology. For example, the tutors, who were of African, Caribbean and white Irish descent, remained fully cognisant of the power dynamics underlying racial identities in a group where we were prioritising the stories of people from racialised and minoritised backgrounds. Colette, who is white and of Irish ancestry, observed that Tutors embarked on an honest examination of their attitudes and beliefs. To do this project justice they had to reckon with the underlying ideology that ‘whiteness’ is the norm from which everything else is measured (Colette Ferns, Academic Supervisor).

This work was complex and multifaceted. As the white tutors were also from minoritised communities it was important to acknowledge the disenfranchisement that comes from homogenising the identities of ethnic groups. We recognised the inherent discrimination experienced by being positioned as ‘…a minority within a minority’ (Chelsea McDonagh, Tutor).

It would have been contrary to the foundations of the work to imply that as staff, we were no longer subject to the challenges and vulnerabilities that give rise to resiliency. We, therefore, committed to learning and sharing throughout the process, recognising the strengths and fragility across our own identities. This helped everyone to connect as co-creators on a visceral level, as well as an intellectual one.
The tutoring was underpinned with the basic ethics of youth work. These included investing time in building trusting relationships amongst group members, cultivating a respectful space for critical inquiry, being flexible, non-judgemental, holding each other to account and maintaining a sense of humour! Together we formed an environment that was resourceful and generous spirited.

The content of the programme was interdisciplinary. Video, creative writing, music and drawing were amongst the tools used to generate contributions from participants on the training. This reinforced our holistic approach. A development would be to apply a transdisciplinary methodology going forward whereby, knowledge from a discipline in one sector could be applied to a different sector to generate new meaning. For example, processes used to understand social issues in psycho-social studies could be explored in a youth work setting to help expand thinking on resilience.
Self-reflection and discernment were two key competencies honed as the training progressed. They supported the dexterity to ‘notice’ more nuanced observations and balance a level of objectivity with recognising moments to introduce views from one’s own lived experience to enrich the process.

One example of ‘noticing’ that became a significant aspect of how we worked together was respecting the modes of communication members of the group used to share their ideas. The use of cameras dropped off quite rapidly after the initial sessions. But the connectivity between group members grew significantly from one meeting to the next, suggesting a correlation between the two.

The young people involved in this initiative exercised a magnificent level of emotional stamina as a group. Cameras off tested the assumption that we need to be seen to fully engage. The black boxes reflected on our screens provided a practical and protective shield, offering a break from the imposed constraints of staring into a device. It signalled a green light to those needing to multi-task, share a space or just to take a beat or two to breathe.

There was absolute fascination when, in the penultimate session, members of the group took up the invitation to turn their cameras on! Each face that filled our screens marked the arrival at yet another milestone. A uniting ‘I am Spartacus’ moment, commented Arden; and a collective witnessing of what had been achieved.
Design, Delivery and Analysis

Collecting stories was the basis for this investigation. Focus groups and one-to-one interviews were the key methods used for generating qualitative data. Insights were also drawn from anecdotes shared through ongoing, colourful banter. Our playfulness helped soften the harsh realities of the topic, at times, and made room for contemplation.

Members of the group learned how to develop research questions, facilitate sessions and analyse data. Once the training was over the larger group was divided into two sets. Each produced research questions, then took it in turns to deliver a focus group to one another. One to one interviews were also delivered on a separate occasion. Once the answers from the focus groups and interviews were transcribed, the peer researchers learned how to code data and identify themes and patterns in participants’ responses. After a deeper dive into the information gathered, members of the group contributed to writing up the findings of the research.

Ethics

A range of processes were developed outlining how data would be produced, recorded and held within PYL. Additional protocols pertaining to academic guidelines to ensure the safeguarding of participants and rights over material produced were adhered to. Looking after the testimonials of participants and applying due rigour to how data was shared were core principles. Risk assessments were completed as part of this work and relevant safety measures were applied to ensure the care of young people and staff.

Emerging Themes

Emotional well-being

- Breathing
- Space
- Boundaries
- Rejection
- No more boxes!
- Endurance
- Art
- Inner and Outer worlds

Self-agency

- Toughness
- Creative
- Drive

Safety

- Choice
- Boundaries

Outliers

- Explore liminal space
- The Role of the Older Sister that young Black and Asian women adopt
- Reimagine the ideology of the ‘Strong Black Woman’
- Challenge the concept ‘privilege’
Outcomes reinforced some of what we already know. For example, whether inner strength was grounded in an organised religion, feeling an interconnectedness with nature or art; all peer trainers expressed a sense of comfort and reassurance in the appreciation of a ‘higher power’. Having a support network of (found) family members and friends and being able to assert self-agency, were also critical to navigating tough times. More concerningly, this work also highlighted how factors that should be basic human rights were considered to be ‘good fortune’. One such example was in relation to asserting boundaries.

There is a paradox when speaking of resilience as it is traditionally understood. To have a strong resilience practice you need to identify boundaries and the ability to enforce them. Yet if one is part of a minoritised and/or racialised community one is less likely to have the ‘advantage’ or the circumstances to do either. What is assumed in the Western narrative to be the keystone of self-actualisation and fully expressed personhood, is revealed to be a ‘luxury’ (Arden Fitzroy, Peer Researcher).

The data also unearthed outliers that reframed the hypothesis for this project, opening the potential to consider less well documented, intangible factors, that also cultivate inner strength.

Finding themes on Jamboard

- “Self-agency, safety, relationships”
- “Valuing story makers”
- “Strength is built from Connection”
- “People not paper!”
- “Honouring the role of the story”
- “Repositioning the expert by experience”
- “Allyship”
- “Learning to be critically curious”
Social Justice and Allyship

The premise of this research was to understand what individuals do to develop their personal resilience. What the research highlighted was advocating for greater internal resolve without also looking to the external systemic pressures, steeped in a colonial past, that necessitate resilience increases oppression. This affects those from minoritised communities most harshly as Nadar, a group member, states

Advising us to be resilient without also looking at how our circumstances could be improved through extensive developments to social policies, is equivalent to telling us to just ‘pull ourselves together’ and endure (Nadar Abdi, Peer Researcher).

Further to this, understanding how social constructs like race, gender and ableism function to advantage dominant social groups is not solely the business of those most directly impacted. Therefore, it was important to work collaboratively with people from a diverse range of demographic communities on this project.

We know that anti-oppressive behaviours must be practised, and it will take different forms for different people, depending on their sphere of influence. Dexter, a young, white man from South East London and member of the group shared

It’s important to realise how much unlearning, relearning and rewiring must be done by white people when committing to anti-racist (and anti-oppressive) practice. Living in a white world, catering for white people, can swallow you up and blind you to your privileges and advantages (Dexter Dare, Peer Researcher).

The research suggests a reframing of our understandings of resilience is required and future models of resilience should be developed using a social justice paradigm. This would allow us to develop a community approach to adversity, as opposed to buttressing the individual to increase their internal capacity to ‘bounce back’ from discriminatory, social struggles.

Ancestral Ties and ‘The Strong Black Woman’

The survivorship stories of grandparents and parents, who withstood atrocities such as genocide or fled civil wars, galvanised a gratitude through their role-modelling of resilience that members of the group said fuelled their tenacity. However, it was the testimonies of older sisters that truly enriched the data.

There is very little documented about the jeopardy that young Black and Asian women adopt in their roles as older sisters to create better outcomes for themselves and pave the way for younger siblings. This aspect of their lives is hugely important to record, as the ideology ‘to be strong’ has virtues - but is grounded in misogynoir

I feel not a lot of people talk about older sisters and daughters. They really do go through a lot and that does influence younger siblings, especially for me…I don’t mind stepping out of my comfort zone knowing stuff can happen – like…bad things (Speaker 1).

There’s a lot I don’t tend to share…I make sure they don’t see that I struggle. If I have to - I will break barriers for them to walk more smoothly (Speaker 2).

There were clear illustrations from the experiences shared, that young Black and Asian women are prepared to withstand pressure and pain, be it from their immediate families, wider communities or by institutions such as school, in order to break glass ceilings. Peer researchers gave examples of how their own resilience was reinforced by witnessing their older sisters ‘being the first’ to go to university, reject marriage and starting a family before completing their education or generally being assertive and learning to say ‘no’. However, there were also indications that ‘toughness’ was costly, in terms of being ostracised and compromising safety. Young Black and Asian women are indeed high achieving, trailblazers who provide strong role models for others. But defying patriarchs in pursuit of equality often compromised their emotional health.

An intervention is required to stem Gen Z, and the young women who follow, from inheriting the toxic myth of ‘the strong Black woman’, which strips their humanity by pathologising their strength. This was another key finding of the research.
Liminal Spaces and Young People from Minoritised Communities

Current understandings of resilience do not adequately capture how young people from minoritised communities support themselves through adversity. There was ‘a knowing’ amongst group members that came from their experiences of being positioned as ‘outsiders’ that was collectively understood but not always spoken. The aspect of resilience that peer trainers described was a liminal space between their internal and external worlds, where ethereal features were cited as also being central to boosting their core strength. These included imagination, ‘mind wandering’, music, poetry, nature, faith, courage, vulnerability, humour, joy ‘the mosh pit’ sport, innovation and gratitude. It was a delicate environment to be approached by invitation and with reverence, where participants cultivated a bank of emotional resources to be drawn on in times of need.

This liminal frequency traversed past, present and future, giving access to the grit and vision of ancestors, who gifted peer researchers with the will to rise again. So, the concept of time was also an important factor within this work. There was a routinised mobilising of strength acquired from knowing about the resiliency of their heritages, rooted in the past, that empowered group members to thrive in the ‘present tense’ (Baraitser, Enduring Time, 2017, p.116).

Exploring, the sub-conscious and unconscious factors that resource young people through challenging times could provide a wealth of new knowledge for future models of well-being.
A Call to Action Going Forward

Placing an emphasis on gathering stories as opposed to ‘collecting data’ enriched the process of this research by humanising the themes under inquiry and making them more relatable. The project established an alternative to orthodox research conventions by training participants to become co-producers; thereby inviting everyone to share the direction and ownership of the work. As co-producers they were ‘holders of knowledge’, which allowed tutors to build on assets and defer to them as ‘Experts by Experience’ (Sandhu, 2017). Remaining open throughout the project enabled us all to constructively challenge the original hypothesis and create the prospect for different perceptions of resilience.

Understanding how we uphold social structures within the youth sector and wider community that prompt the need for young people to be resilient, is the heart of the learning from this work.

Often the term is used to distract from structural changes that are desperately needed and instead places emphasis and responsibility onto those being oppressed. It is undeserved suffering repackaged as a pat on the back. A congratulations for an emotional skill that they should never have had to develop (Chelsea McDonagh, Tutor).

Now is the time for a radical shift in how we create youth policies. Adopting a transdisciplinary approach will allow us to ‘borrow’ ideas across disciplines that assist the application of new praxis. The contributions of young women, men, people from LGBTQ+ communities and those of Black, Asian, and Traveller communities and other ‘unseen’ minoritised demographic groups, should be integral to strategies addressing inequalities going forward. This will support the process of understanding resilience as a collective endeavour to dismantle social structures of oppression - rather than a personal quest to keep on, keeping on.
Peer Researchers in Alphabetical Order

Nadar Abdi
Carlotta Naima Adams
Dexter Dare
Antonio Ferreira
Arden Fitzroy
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Salem Habtom
Muntaha Hussain
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Damilola Okanrende
Arif Hoque Shah

Tutors
Sara Ahmed
Chelsea McDonagh
Sandra Vacciana
Matthew Walsham

Academic Supervision
Colette Ferns

When I Rise
By Salem Habtom, Peer Researcher

When I rise
I look back and appreciate how far I’ve come
I now know I can do it
My past is a record of that

I’ve been able to make it up from the lowest point
To now feeling I’m on top of a mountain!
It was a hard one to climb
Twists and turns throughout
Points where it seemed the end would never come

This birds eye view gives perspective
I can see the journey travelled
My progress is admirable
Though I say so myself!

These thoughts come to mind amid joyful laughter
They’re what I waited to exclaim
I fell to my knees
But now I’ve made it
I’m free to rise again
Acknowledgements

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Contributors were: Nadar Abdi, Dexter Dare, Colette Ferns, Arden Fitzroy, Chelsea McDonagh, Salem Habtom and Damilola Okanrende.

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Visit the project webpage for Transcending Resilience here.

Endnotes

1 For more information about our work visit: https://www.partnershipforyounglondon.org.uk/ourwork

2 Final quote on back page by Speaker 3.

References


Secondary Reading


‘As human beings we ask questions and find ways of answering them.’²