

Navigating the Intersection of Vulnerability and Resilience: The Lived Experiences of the Abused Foster Children in South Africa.

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Abstract

Foster care is the temporary placement of a child who needs care and protection. The child is placed in the care of a suitable person who is not the parent or guardian of the child. This study aims to critically explore the nuanced experiences of foster children who have endured abuse, focusing on the intersections between vulnerability and resilience within the South African foster care system. The primary objective of this article is to understand how abuse shapes the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of these children, while also identifying the factors that contribute to their resilience and capacity to overcome adversities. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study adopts an exploratory research design, which allows for an in-depth examination of existing literature and secondary data sources relevant to the subject matter. As a comprehensive desktop study, the research synthesizes a range of qualitative data derived from reports, academic articles, governmental and non-governmental documents, and other pertinent resources. Thematic data analysis was employed to systematically identify and interpret recurring themes and patterns in the data, with a particular focus on the vulnerabilities these children face and the adaptive strategies they develop to navigate their challenges. The findings reveal a complex and multifaceted picture of foster children's lives, where the Psychological Trauma and Long-term effects of abuse are compounded including, stigma and Social Exclusion in their foster care system, role of Cultural and Societal Factors in Shaping Resilience and barriers to access support services have been found as the central findings. The findings of this article intend to inform and influence policymakers, the department of social development to provide the conducive environment that is more effective for child protection.

Keywords: *Abuse, Children, Foster Care, Resilience, Vulnerability*

Introduction and Background

The global issue of child abuse and the subsequent placement of victims in foster care systems is intertwined with intense personal experiences of survival, healing, and trauma. According to Kim and Maguire-Jack (2021), the socio-historical and cultural context of foster children who have experienced abuse in South Africa is distinct, characterized by persistent poverty, social disintegration, and inequality. In addition to increasing their susceptibility, these circumstances put their resilience to the ultimate test (English, Thompson & White, 2015). A system that protects the child's best interests is the goal of South Africa's child protection framework, which is largely governed by the Children's Act 38 of 2005. However, there are still implementation gaps that leave many children without proper protection or support, especially in rural and under-resourced areas (Doyle & Aizer, 2018). These children frequently grapple with the compounded trauma of abuse, removal from their families, and adjustment to often unstable foster care placements

Collins and Mead (2021) states that foster care systems in nations like the US, UK, and Australia, in comparison, function within stronger child welfare frameworks, but they are not without their own setbacks. Foster youth in the United States, for example, are said to experience high rates of mental health issues, placement instability, and aging out without proper support (LaBrenz, Baiden, Faulkner & Fong, 2021). Like this, the foster care system in the United Kingdom has come under fire for not consistently providing emotional support and for not paying enough attention to children's voices. However, these nations have made progress in incorporating trauma-informed care and prioritizing the involvement of children in decision-making (Koh, Ware & Lee, 2021). The foster care system in South Africa, on the other hand, is still overworked and underfunded, with social workers dealing with unrealistic caseloads and little funding for therapeutic interventions. Dettlaff & Boyd (2020), states that in the Global North, resilience frameworks are increasingly influencing practice and policy; however, South Africa is still lagging in incorporating resilience-promoting strategies into child welfare initiatives.

Resilience defined as the capacity to adjust favorably in the face of severe adversity, is a dynamic process that is impacted by both internal and external resources (Jonson-Reid., Emery., Drake., Stahlschmidt, 2010). The resilience process in South Africa has been found to be significantly influenced by cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, community-based coping strategies, and familial structures (including those outside of the nuclear family) (Sedlak & Ellis, 2022). However, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, intergenerational trauma, and socioeconomic instability undermine many of these protective factors (Delfabbro., Fernandez., McCormick., & Kettler, 2013). By contrast, countries like Australia have institutionalized multidisciplinary responses including therapeutic foster care models that systematically cultivate resilience through tailored mental health and educational supports (LaBrenz., Baiden., Faulkner., & Fong, 2021). These international approaches offer valuable insights but must be contextualized when applied to South African realities.

Foster children in South Africa frequently struggle with stigmatization, uneven caregiving, and disjointed service delivery, all of which undermine their sense of security and value (Drake., Fluke., Kim., Orsi., & Stubblefield, 2022). These vulnerabilities are made worse by poor placement monitoring and a lack of child-centered planning. On the other hand, Scandinavian nations such as Sweden and Norway have implemented child welfare strategies that prioritize rights-based participation, early intervention, and prevention, which has improved long-term results (Hélie., Poirier., & Turcotte, 2014). The significance of both personal and interpersonal support networks as well as the larger institutional and governance frameworks supporting foster care are highlighted by these distinctions (Liu., Pawitan, & Clements, 2018). The risk of psychosocial harm to children escaping abuse and foster care will persist if there is no systemic commitment to fostering resilience through policy, practice, and social support.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to close the knowledge gap between localized conceptions of resilience among South African foster children who have experienced abuse and global best practices. With a focus on the lived experiences of South African foster care children, the study intended to investigate how resilience is conceptualized, promoted, or impeded in various national contexts using a critical and comparative lens. The study offered profound insights into how children interpret their experiences and the tools they use to survive and prosper by using a qualitative methodology. The study aims to inform more comprehensive and culturally sensitive approaches to foster care policy and intervention by examining both individual strengths and systemic flaws. Ultimately, understanding resilience not just as a psychological outcome but as a social and structural process will be vital in transforming the foster care experience for abused children in South Africa and beyond.

Literature review

Understanding of Foster Care and Child abuse.

According to Shaw (2021), foster care is a type of alternative care intended to give children who are unable to live with their biological families because of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or other family emergencies short-term or long-term care. In South Africa, foster care is defined by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as providing a secure, nurturing, and safe environment that supports the child's growth and well-being. Therefore, foster children are minors who are placed with state-approved caregivers who are not their biological parents; social services usually oversee this arrangement. Van Breda (2017) states that these kids frequently have trauma histories when they first enter the system, which puts them at higher risk for emotional, social, and developmental difficulties. Foster children still encounter instability, recurrent placements, and feelings of rejection despite the protective purpose of foster care, according to research, which can affect their sense of self and identity (Lombard & Sibanda, 2015). As a result, both the protective roles of foster care and the intricate realities that children in the system must be considered for a thorough understanding of the system.

The purpose of the foster care system is to temporarily care for children who have been taken from their biological families because of problems like abuse, abandonment, or neglect (Collins & Mead, 2021). The foster care system in South Africa is essential to protecting at-risk children and maintaining their wellbeing while pursuing permanent placements or family reunification. According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, South Africa's child protection system seeks to keep children safe and make sure they are raised in settings that support their normal emotional and psychological growth (Jones & Jonson-Reid, 2023). Foster children face difficulties, especially if they have experienced sexual, emotional, or physical abuse. While acclimating to new and unfamiliar caregiving environments, they must navigate the trauma of their past, which frequently results in psychological scars that impact their emotional and behavioral development (Hélie, Poirier & Turcotte, 2014).

According to Kim and Maguire-Jack (2021), child abuse is defined as any action or inaction on the part of a parent or caregiver that causes physical, emotional, or sexual harm to a child. A variety of societal factors, such as poverty, substance abuse, and domestic violence, have been connected to the high rate of child abuse in the nation. Biehal., In the foster care setting, attempts to build supportive, healthy relationships are hampered by the emotional and psychological effects of abuse, which frequently lead to a lack of trust in caregivers and authority figures (Greenfield, Zhang & Simmel, 2023). The lived experience of abused foster children is situated at the nexus of vulnerability and resilience. A child's well-being is severely hampered by the trauma of abuse, but these effects are lessened by resilience factors like access to mental health services and supportive relationships. According to Doyle and Aizer (2018), foster children who receive regular care, encouragement, and emotional support are more likely to recover from their traumatic experiences and learn healthy coping mechanisms. However, the South African context, with its distinct socio-political challenges, emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed, culturally competent care in building resilience (Sedlak & Ellis, 2022). A greater comprehension of how foster children manage their vulnerabilities and how resilience can be developed through institutional practices as well as within the larger societal framework is made possible by critically examining this lived experience.

Cultural Understanding of Foster care in South Africa

In South Africa, customs and cultural norms have a significant impact on foster care. Kinship care is frequently valued in traditional African societies, where vulnerable or orphaned children are looked after by extended family members. According to Barth and Liggett-Creel (2014), this approach is based on the collaborative character of African communities, where everyone shares responsibility for the welfare of children. Nonetheless, contemporary perspectives influenced by urbanization and socioeconomic difficulties have resulted in a greater dependence on official foster care agencies. Font and Maguire-Jack (2020) states that access to government subsidies frequently motivates fostering, but sociocultural ideas also have a big impact on how people perceive things. Social isolation and stigma are commonplace for foster children and their careers. Misconceptions regarding foster care in society, such as the idea that foster children

are troublesome or that foster parents are driven only by money, may be the cause of this (Kim & Maguire-Jack, 2021). Foster children's sense of loneliness may be exacerbated by the stigma, which can make it difficult for them to integrate into communities and schools (Doyle & Aizer, 2018). In the foster care system, especially in traditional settings, extended family members play a crucial role. To keep children connected to their cultural and familial roots, they frequently take over as the primary carers. The African ideology of Ubuntu, which places a strong emphasis on connection and reciprocal care, is consistent with this practice. These are frequently uncles, aunts, and grandparents (Collins & Mead, 2021). Children are guaranteed to stay in their cultural and familial networks due to this arrangement, which can offer them emotional stability and a feeling of acceptance. However, when financial resources are scarce, the participation of extended families may occasionally result in disagreements over decisions (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020).

Legislation and Policy frameworks

The Children' Act 38 of 2005

Foster children frequently experience severe emotional, psychological, and physical difficulties because of their past abuse and neglect, which can show up in several ways over their lifetime. In South Africa, the Children's Act 38 of 2005 aims to protect and promote the welfare of children, including those in foster care, by advancing their best interests and making sure that abused children get the support and care they need (Department of Social Development, 2023). Even with these legal safeguards, systemic issues continue to prevent many foster children from thriving and fully recovering. The conflict between vulnerability and resilience is especially noticeable when one considers how the Act's provisions are comprehensively intersected with the lived experiences of foster children, which may not always result in successful interventions for each child (South African Government, 2023).

The effectiveness of Institutional frameworks such as the Children's Act, as well as personal, familial, and community factors, frequently influence the resilience of foster children who have been abused. According to the Department of Social Development (2023), many children do not naturally possess resilience; rather, it is a quality that is developed over time through a supportive environment that includes opportunities for social and educational integration, stable relationships, and access to psychological support. A framework that supports children's rights to safety, care, and involvement in life-altering decisions is what South Africa's Children's Act aims to establish (Juta Statutes Editors, 2024). Due to issues with foster care placement availability and the sufficiency of existing support networks, the Act's implementation has been uneven. This inconsistency results in a scenario where children are not always able to develop the resilience necessary to overcome the challenges posed by their past trauma (South African Government, 2023).

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 emphasizes the significance of honoring children's autonomy and agency in the healing process by requiring that their opinions be heard in all decisions that impact them. Because it gives children a sense of control over their situation, this participatory approach is essential to building resilience. However, a lack of funding and qualified staff who can interact with foster children in an effective manner frequently makes it difficult to put this idea into practice. According to Juta Statutes Editors (2024), the framework of the Act also prioritizes the prevention of abuse and the rehabilitation of children who have experienced it, with a focus on the holistic well-being of children. Although the Act offers a strong legal foundation, its actual application frequently falls short, placing foster children in a precarious situation where they are unable to obtain the care and resources that would enable them to develop resilience (South African Government, 2023). Therefore, even though the Children's Act is an important piece of legislation, its capacity to help children who have experienced abuse develop resilience depends on improved funding and more efficient execution.

The Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978

Green (2024) states that the lived experiences of abused foster children in South Africa frequently highlight the crucial nexus between resilience and vulnerability. When it comes to helping social workers meet the complex needs of these children, the Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978 is essential. (Delfabbro et al, 2013) social workers, psychologists, and other professionals who provide care for vulnerable groups, such as abused children, are subject to professional conduct regulations under this Act. This Act assigns social workers the responsibility of offering the required interventions to aid foster children in their development and rehabilitation. However, because social professionals' services are frequently underfunded, overburdened, and inconsistent across different regions, many foster children still

struggle with the long-lasting effects of abuse despite the legal framework. According to the South African Council for Social Service Professions (2025), the Act's focus on social workers' professional credentials and duties is crucial, but it may not adequately address the structural obstacles these workers encounter, like heavy caseloads and scarce funding, which eventually affect the care given to foster children.

Foster children who have been abused can be said to have developed resilience as a result of the support networks that are in place, with social workers being an essential part of this process. (Goldberg et al, 2021), social workers are required to evaluate, intervene, and support children who have experienced trauma to foster an environment where resilience can grow, as per the Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978. However, based on their lived experiences, foster children in South Africa appear to frequently be at further risk because of the social welfare system's fragmentation and gaps in service delivery. Social workers are required by the Act to act in the best interests of the child, but many children find it challenging to get the resources they need to fully recover due to the complexity of their needs and a lack of professional support (Green, 2024). Furthermore, the social service sector's ability to address the various needs of foster children, especially those who have experienced severe abuse, influences how social workers and children interact. The discrepancy between the ideal provisions of the Act and the actual circumstances faced by these children emphasizes the necessity of a more sustainable and integrated approach to foster care (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2024).

The quality of social work practice" has a significant impact on foster children's personal and community resilience in addition to the legal framework established by the Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978. In this situation, resilience entails a dynamic interaction between the child's external support system and their internal coping strategies. Despite being trained to assess and intervene, social workers frequently encounter difficulties in putting these interventions into practice, including a lack of collaboration among stakeholders, a lack of community resources, and inadequate training in trauma-informed care (Greenfield et al, 2023). The Act emphasizes the value of professional behavior and ethical practice, but social workers who work in environments with limited funding and high demand find it difficult to provide the kind of care these children need to develop resilience (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2024). This reality emphasizes how social services, schools, and community organizations must work together more successfully to build a stronger support network for abused foster children. In the end, the Social Service Professions Act provides social workers with a crucial framework, but it needs to be more closely matched with real-world situations to guarantee that foster children in South Africa can strike a careful balance between resilience and vulnerability (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

According to Critical Social Theory (CST), children's lived realities are shaped by intricate power relationships, structural injustices, and historical injustices. CST questions established systems by highlighting how institutional control, ideology, and power create and maintain social hierarchies. The intertwining legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and economic marginalization provide a deep foundation for the vulnerability of foster children in South Africa, especially those who have been abused (LaBrenz et al, 2021). Such children frequently live in under-resourced communities where trauma cycles are sustained by institutional neglect and insufficient child welfare systems. CST calls for a recognition of how these socio-political systems contribute to a lack of protection and representation for foster children, reinforcing their status as marginalized individuals within an already stratified society (Postone, 2015).

Falk (2021), the children's resilience, however, should be viewed in the larger framework of resistance to systemic oppression rather than romanticized as merely personal strength. Through CST, resilience is reframed as a political and collective act, an assertion of agency in a world that is set up to silence these voices. Despite systemic shortcomings, South African foster children who survive abuse frequently find strength in their cultural identities, informal support networks, and community networks (LaBrenz et al, 2021). Their stories disprove popular narratives that pathologize underprivileged and abused children while emphasizing how these children negotiate oppressive social settings and assert their dignity. Resilience, therefore, becomes a critique of the system itself, an embodiment of hope and transformation born out of struggle (Bhambra & Gurminder, 2021). CST encourages this reframing, insisting that to truly understand resilience, one must interrogate the conditions under which it emerges.

Critical Social Theory also emphasized the significance of praxis, or the fusion of theory and practice. Any investigation into the lived experiences of foster children contributed to institutional and social change in order to be

genuinely transformative. This entails tearing down exploitative systems, promoting fair resource distribution, and putting trauma-informed policies into place that take abuse survivors' lived experiences into consideration (Falk, 2021). CST views academics, professionals, and decision-makers as change agents rather than passive recipients of information. This entails addressing gender inequality, poverty, and systemic racism in South African child welfare systems as well as elevating foster children's voices in policy discussions (Bhambra & Gurminder, 2021). Their experiences serve as a powerful lens to critique and reconstruct social institutions, aiming for a society that not only acknowledges but actively works to rectify its historical and present injustices.

According to critical social theory, children must be empowered and given a say in decisions that impact their lives in order to develop resilience and a sense of agency. There is frequently a gap between the services that children receive and what they need for their well-being when they are excluded from the decision-making process (LaBrenz et al, 2021). Although laws like the Children's Act 38 of 2005 and the Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978 are intended to safeguard children's rights in South Africa, their actual application frequently ignores the structural obstacles that stand in the way of significant change (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2023). Foster children's lived experiences and voices should be given priority in policymaking, according to critical social theory, so that they are not only considered as objects of care but also actively involved in their own recovery and resiliency (Drake et al, 2022). Consequently, the theory promotes a more profound structural shift in the way society perceives and interacts with foster children, especially those who have experienced maltreatment.

Research Methodology

The study adhered to a qualitative research approach, which is particularly suited for exploring complex, subjective experiences and understanding the nuances of human behavior and emotions. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, enabling the researcher to capture rich, contextual insights into how foster children who have endured abuse navigate the interplay between vulnerability and resilience. The study did not seek to quantify the experiences of these children, but rather to explore and interpret the meaning behind their experiences through a lens that acknowledges the complexity and depth of their individual and collective journeys. The study applied an exploratory research design, which is particularly beneficial when examining under-researched or complex phenomena, such as the lived experiences of foster children who have been abused. An exploratory design was chosen because it allowed the investigation of the phenomenon in a flexible, open-ended manner without preconceived hypotheses or rigid frameworks. This design facilitated the discovery of unexpected insights and patterns that might otherwise have been overlooked. The goal was not only to describe the current realities of foster children in South Africa but also to explore the underlying factors and mechanisms that shape their resilience in the face of trauma. An exploratory approach was particularly suited to capturing the nuanced ways in which these children interact with and respond to the systemic and societal challenges they face. By not constraining the study to predefined variables, the researcher was able to gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of the intersection of vulnerability and resilience.

The study was conducted as a comprehensive desktop research study, meaning that it relied on secondary data sources rather than direct primary data collection through interviews or surveys. The researcher systematically gathered and analyzed existing literature, including academic journal articles, governmental and non-governmental reports, policy documents, case studies, and other relevant publications on foster care, child abuse, and trauma in South Africa that was published and accessible for the past 10 from 2015 to 2025. The selection of sources was guided by their relevance to the research questions, credibility, and the depth of insight they provided into the experiences of foster children. Criteria for inclusion included the inclusion of perspectives on foster care systems, child abuse, resilience, and vulnerability, particularly within the South African context. The data gathered from these sources was carefully analyzed for key themes and insights into the lived experiences of foster children, ensuring that a broad range of perspectives were considered to enrich the findings and avoid bias.

Thematic data analysis was applied to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns and themes within the collected literature. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility, accessibility, and its ability to provide rich, detailed, and complex accounts of the data. Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for qualitative research that involves large volumes of text or diverse sources, as it allows the researchers to organize and describe the data in a way that is both systematic and reflective of the underlying meanings. The process involved reading through the selected texts multiple times to become familiar with the data, followed by coding significant pieces of information that related to the key

research questions. These codes were then grouped into themes that represented recurring patterns related to the vulnerability and resilience of foster children. This categorization allowed the researchers to identify commonalities and divergences in the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape resilience and vulnerability in the context of abuse and foster care. Thematic analysis was particularly justified in this study because it enabled the exploration of both the shared and unique experiences of foster children while highlighting the complex, multifaceted nature of their lived realities. As a result of using this method, the study was able to produce a rich, nuanced understanding of the subject matter, making it suitable for informing policy and practice in South Africa's foster care system.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Psychological Trauma and Long-term effects of abuse

The study presents important findings about the long-term impacts of abuse on foster children in terms of psychological trauma. Sedlak and Ellis (2022) early childhood abuse survivors frequently carry lifelong psychological scars, especially if they were raised in foster care settings where emotional and physical neglect are common. Jones and Jonson-Reid (2023) indicates that depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are among the mental health conditions that frequently show up because of the trauma caused by physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Establishing stable, trustworthy relationships was frequently hampered by the persistent feelings of worthlessness, self-doubt, and emotional numbness that many of the foster children in the study reported (Phasha, 2010). This mistrust is made worse by the foster care system's own instability, where placement instability makes people feel even more abandoned and insecure. The emotional trauma experienced by these children often becomes internalized, leading to low self-esteem and difficulties in forming healthy emotional attachments later in life, both of which significantly impact their mental and emotional well-being (Edwards, Wakefield, Healy, & Wildeman, 2021).

The study further emphasizes the profoundly social and psychological long-term impacts of abuse on foster children. According to Shaw (2021), children who have been abused frequently feel alone and misunderstood, have trouble integrating into society, and may struggle in school, which can result in a vicious cycle of social exclusion and academic failure. Goldberg, Brodzinsky, Singer and Crozier (2021), the stigma attached to being an abuse survivor and a foster child can also cause the child to internalize unfavorable social stereotypes, which exacerbate their sense of loneliness and alienation. Benton (2016) states that foster children become even more disengaged because of this social disconnection, which makes it more challenging for them to get the social support systems they need to recover. According to Feely and Bosk (2021), these social obstacles exacerbate the trauma of abuse, making these children more susceptible to a variety of detrimental consequences, such as subpar academic performance, substance misuse, and even criminal activity as a coping mechanism for their unresolved emotional distress.

The study also shows that many foster children show Incredible resilience despite these significant psychological and social difficulties. Their ability to endure and flourish in such harsh circumstances is frequently ascribed to the assistance they obtain from sympathetic caregivers, neighborhood resources, and therapeutic interventions (Falk, 2021). Through a variety of adaptive strategies, such as creating art, finding emotional solace in peer relationships, or even growing up with a strong sense of personal agency, these children frequently find ways to deal with their trauma. Van Breda (2017) states that resilience is not universal, though, and the stability of the child's social support system, the quality of the foster care setting, and the availability of mental health services all have a significant impact on the long-term healing process. According to Walker-Williams and Fouché (2018), many of these children struggle with the long-term effects of abuse well into adulthood if they do not receive consistent and focused support. To foster resilience and lessen the long-term effects of their trauma, the study emphasizes the significance of trauma-informed care and intervention strategies that are attentive to the complex psychological and social needs of foster children who have experienced abuse (Truter et al, 2018).

Theme 2: Stigma and Social Exclusion in foster care system

The study found that foster children who have suffered abuse face widespread social exclusion and stigma. Benton (2016) states that foster children who have experienced abuse in the past frequently experience social rejection, which exacerbates their already precarious emotional and mental health. Many children talked about feeling "different" from their classmates, not only because they were in foster care but also because of the unfavorable stereotypes attached to their status (Theron & Donald, 2013). Foster children are socially marginalized because of these stereotypes, which

frequently portray them as problematic, challenging, or even undeserving of love and care. More stigma is placed on foster children, especially those who have experienced abuse (Van Breda and Hlungwani, 2019). They are frequently viewed as “damaged” or “broken,” bearing the weight of a traumatic past that others are unable to comprehend or relate to. Their social integration is severely hampered by this stigma, which is engrained in societal perceptions and makes it challenging for them to build meaningful, trustworthy relationships with peers, teachers, and even foster families (Walker-Williams & Fouché, 2018). The study emphasized that foster children frequently experience various types of abuse that increase their susceptibility and interfere with their developmental paths. Prior to and during foster placement, children in foster care systems around the world, including South Africa, commonly report experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. According to Sedlak and Ellis (2022), the high rates of poverty, violence, and systemic inequality in South Africa increase the likelihood of abuse in alternative care settings. Foster children frequently report emotional neglect, in which their caregivers treat them as less valuable than biological children and fail to show them love or support. Font and Maguire-Jack (2020) states that some foster homes lack adequate supervision, leaving children in situations where they are susceptible to exploitation, which makes sexual abuse especially alarming. These lived experiences not only violate their rights but also impair their capacity to build resilience, reinforcing cycles of trauma and marginalization (Jones and Jonson-Reid, 2023).

Within the foster care system, social exclusion takes many different forms and is a natural result of this stigma. According to Shaw (2021), children in foster care who have been abused often face rejection from peers, biological families, and occasionally even their foster families, which leaves them without a reliable support system. Their development is harmed by this exclusion in addition to being emotionally distressing. Phasha (2010) states that many of the children in the study expressed how they felt alone, isolated, and like they didn’t belong in their communities or foster homes. They frequently experience rejection from society at large as well as from their biological families, which feeds into their belief that they are undeserving of love or attention (Collishaw, Gardner, Aber & Cluver, 2016). Many people experience bullying or alienation from their peers at school because of this social exclusion. Their peers frequently treat them as outcasts because they are ignorant of the trauma they have experienced, which exacerbates the children’s feelings of rejection and difference (Theron & Donald, 2013). Foster children find it more difficult to recover and flourish because of this ongoing social and academic exclusion, which feeds a vicious cycle of low self-esteem and emotional distress.

The study also emphasizes how the public’s Ignorance of South Africa’s foster care system contributes to the stigma and social exclusion experienced by foster children. Font and Maguire-Jack (2020) states that many of the children said that foster care was viewed negatively by society, which had an impact on how they saw themselves and how they interacted with other people. Foster children are susceptible to discrimination and marginalization, even within the foster care system itself, due to the general public’s ignorance of the difficulties they face (Falk, 2021). The results highlight the need for a more widespread cultural shift toward empathy and education regarding the realities of foster care, including the unique difficulties faced by abused children. The stigma and social exclusion that contribute to the challenges faced by foster children may be lessened with increased awareness of these issues, which would ultimately create a more welcoming and encouraging environment for their development and healing (Van Breda & Hlungwani, 2019).

Theme 3: Role of Cultural and Societal Factors in Shaping Resilience among abuse survivors

According to the study, foster parents help abuse foster children heal. Foster children’s psychological and emotional recovery is greatly impacted by the relationship they have with their caregivers. According to Sedlak and Ellis (2022), foster caregivers are frequently important sources of security and trust for children who have experienced abuse, especially those who demonstrate empathy, stability, and sensitivity. The presence of a caring caregiver served as a much-needed stabilizing force for many of the children in the study in an otherwise chaotic environment. Van Breda (2017) states that caregivers foster a sense of security that help children to start recovering from their trauma through their constant care, attention and emotional support. The trust built within these relationships fosters an environment where children can begin to process their pain and rebuild their sense of self-worth (Theron & Donald, 2013).

The study does point out, though, that not all foster caregiver relationships are helpful for the recovery process. The ability of the caregiver to comprehend the intricate emotional and psychological needs of abused children is crucial to the effectiveness of the caregiver-child relationship (Walker-Williams & Fouché, 2018). The child’s healing process may be hampered rather than helped when caregivers are overburdened by systemic or personal stressors or lack the

necessary training in trauma-informed care. Due to caregivers who were either unable or unwilling to offer the kind of nurturing and support required for recovery, some study reported feeling neglected, emotionally distant, or even experiencing additional emotional harm. Benton (2016) states that this lack of understanding or emotional connection prolongs the child's psychological suffering by intensifying feelings of abandonment and reinforcing their sense of inadequacy for love and care. According to Hills, Meyer-Weitz & Asante, (2016), foster caregivers must be trained to identify and address the complex emotional needs of abused children to create a healing environment in the caregiving setting. Despite the difficulties, the study also shows that resilient foster children frequently have strong, healthy relationships with their caregivers. Foster parents provide their foster children with more than just the necessities clothing, food, and shelter can have a profound impact on their recovery (Lombard & Sibanda, 2015). These connections give children a role model for safe, trustworthy relationships, which is crucial for their social and emotional growth. Some study participants said that when their caregivers showed them consistent attention and showed real concern for their welfare, they felt empowered and more self-assured (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2020).

Theme 4: Barriers to access support services

According to the study, foster children encounter several major obstacles when trying to get support services, especially those pertaining to social integration, trauma recovery, and mental health. Service delivery's geographical and infrastructure constraints have been identified as a major obstacle. According to Sedlak and Ellis (2022), many foster children, especially those placed in rural or isolated areas, are located far from social services, mental health facilities, and specialized support networks. Long wait times and a shortage of trauma-trained professionals are common outcomes of overburdened demand, even in urban areas where such services are available. The study highlights how important it is for children who have experienced abuse to have prompt access to therapeutic support (Lombard & Sibanda, 2015). However, the chronic shortage of qualified child psychologists, counselors, and social workers, compounded by distance and logistical challenges, severely restricts their ability to receive appropriate care.

According to Feely and Bosk (2021), financial limitations are a major barrier to receiving support services, in addition to geographic limitations. According to the study, South Africa's foster care system lacks adequate funding. While necessities like food, housing, and education are provided, crucial services like psychological counseling, specialized trauma care, and extracurricular activities that foster emotional well-being are frequently unavailable. The additional expenses of therapy, mental health support, or any other supplemental services that could aid in the children's recovery are beyond the means of many foster families, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Van Breda (2017) states that the comprehensive care that children require to recover from their traumatic experiences is limited by the foster care system's lack of resources. Many foster children are consequently left without proper psychological support, which increases their susceptibility and prevents them from becoming resilient (Truter, Theron, & Fouché, 2018). Access to essential support is further complicated by the fact that foster caregivers, who are frequently overworked, must navigate intricate bureaucratic procedures to obtain such services.

The study also shows that foster children and their caregivers face additional obstacles due to social stigma and a lack of knowledge about mental health care. Foster children frequently bear the brunt of the stigma surrounding mental health issues, which is still very prevalent in many communities. Collins and Mead (2021), children who seek help for trauma-related issues may be deterred from seeking available support because they fear being labeled as "damaged" or "unworthy." Furthermore, caregivers may feel ashamed or unworthy of requiring outside assistance, especially if they are already subjected to social criticism for being foster parents (Shaw, 2021). Underutilization of available services is frequently caused by the stigma associated with both foster care and mental health treatment. According to Barth and Liggett-Creel (2014), breaking down these barriers requires cultivating an understanding culture where mental health treatment is accepted, and foster parents are supported without passing judgment. Stigma can be lessened, service access can be improved, and foster children who have experienced abuse can eventually benefit from more public education and training for both caregivers and children about the value of mental health care and the resources available (Greenfield et al, 2023).

Theme 5: Impact of socio-economic factors on vulnerability and resilience

The study found that the resilience of foster children who have been abused is significantly shaped by cultural and societal factors. There are both advantages and disadvantages to South Africa's multicultural environment for these children's resilience development (Feely & Bosk, 2021). For abused children, certain cultural values like extended family structures, community support, and a sense of shared responsibility serve as an essential safety net, guiding them through their traumatic experiences. Some foster children found that their spiritual beliefs, cultural customs, and rituals provided them with a sense of hope and belonging (Greenfield, Zhang, & Simmel, 2023). Conventional wisdom and cultural networks frequently offer a framework for comprehending and treating trauma, giving children a way to cope and adjust to their challenging situations. Children were able to develop resilience in these environments by relying on the emotional support of community members and caregivers who recognized and appreciated their experiences in a setting that was familiar to them culturally (Sedlak & Ellis, 2022). However, the study also highlights how societal and cultural variables can operate as barriers to resilience, particularly in contexts where stigmas and conventional norms around abuse and foster care are widespread. A child's feelings of shame and alienation are exacerbated in certain cultural contexts by the deeply embedded stigma attached to being a foster child or having been abused (Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). The inclination of society to blame the abused child or see them as "damaged" frequently keeps these children from getting the help they need or completely assimilating into their communities (Drake et al, 2022). Certain cultural stereotypes about abuse, such as the idea that fostering children are troublemakers or a burden on society, may make them feel even more alone. Additionally, societal taboos surrounding mental health and trauma recovery may discourage both foster children and their caregivers from seeking professional support (Lombard & Sibanda, 2015). This cultural silence on matters of mental health exacerbates the stigma and hinders the development of coping mechanisms that foster children need to build resilience, leaving them more vulnerable to long-term emotional and psychological distress (Greenfield et al, 2023).

The study also emphasizes how crucial culturally sensitive interventions are for building resilience despite these obstacles. The creation of healing environments that honor the child's identity and background while attending to their psychological needs is achievable through the recognition and integration of cultural and societal factors into support services (LaBrenz et al, 2021). Children can regain a connection to their heritage and discover strength in their cultural identity with the support of culturally informed approaches, such as integrating regional customs, rituals, or spiritual practices into therapeutic procedures (Sedlak & Ellis, 2022). Some of the children in the study, for instance, stated that they found solace and emotional release in participating in cultural activities like storytelling, music, or customary rituals. These culturally appropriate activities strengthened a feeling of continuity and belonging in addition to aiding in emotional healing. The study highlights the need for policies and interventions to be adapted to the cultural contexts of the children they serve to effectively foster resilience. This will guarantee that support services are both culturally appropriate and easily accessible. This approach not only mitigates the impact of trauma but also empowers children to leverage their cultural resources, fostering agency and hope for the future (Falk, 2021).

Discussion

In South Africa, foster children who have been abused suffer from severe and lasting psychological trauma that frequently follows them well into adulthood. Anxiety, depression, PTSD, and attachment disorders are just a few of the complex emotional and cognitive issues that these children commonly struggle with. Abuse interferes with the development of emotional control and identity formation, especially when it occurs early in life. Being transferred between several foster homes frequently exacerbated the feelings of inadequacy, enduring fear, and mistrust that many studies described. Their trauma is exacerbated by this instability because the lack of stable caregivers interferes with the development of secure attachment, which is essential for recovery. These psychological wounds manifest in school settings, relationships, and even into employment later in life, making the trauma both deeply personal and socially embedded.

Social exclusion and stigma have been identified as major barriers in the foster care system. Numerous foster children reported that their foster families and communities treated them differently, frequently viewing them as "damaged" or "other." Their internalized trauma is reinforced by this marginalization, which also lowers their sense of value. These children usually experience bullying and discrimination in social settings and schools, which further distances them from their classmates. Such exclusion frequently stems from societal attitudes that blame or shame victims rather than aiding in their recovery, which are based on false beliefs about foster care and abuse. The foster

system itself occasionally perpetuates this exclusion through bureaucratic procedures that disregard the child's emotional and social welfare and inadequate training for foster parents on trauma-informed care. These children's resilience and ongoing vulnerability are shaped in complex ways by cultural and societal factors. Traditional norms and values that either support or undermine a child's ability to recover from abuse are part of South Africa's diverse cultural landscape. In certain communities, talking about abuse is frowned upon, which results in silence, denial, and a downplaying of the child's experiences. On the other hand, in a supportive setting, cultural values like Ubuntu, which place an emphasis on group care and solidarity, promote resilience. Children who were placed in foster homes that were culturally aligned and where the caregivers valued their history, and identity expressed a greater sense of hope and belonging. These results highlight the significance of culturally sensitive foster care that uses cultural assets to promote healing in addition to acknowledging trauma.

These children's vulnerability and trauma are further exacerbated by obstacles to receiving support services. Health services, psychological counseling, and trauma-informed education are frequently underfunded or unavailable, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. Another factor that makes the gap between services and the children they are meant to assist worse is a lack of culturally competent care and language barriers. Additionally, the child welfare system's bureaucratic inefficiencies frequently result in mismatched placements or delays in intervention, which can traumatize children instead of helping them. Due to these systemic issues, policy reform and infrastructure investment that prioritizes fostering children's lived experiences are desperately needed. The degree to which abused foster children are vulnerable and their capacity for resilience is greatly influenced by socioeconomic factors. All other risk factors including limited access to high-quality foster homes, education, nutrition, and therapeutic services are made worse by poverty. Numerous children in the study reported that their foster homes were financially stressful, with caregivers either unable or unwilling to provide for their necessities. Resilience, however, was significantly higher in children raised in stable homes with at least a moderate level of emotional and financial support. This correlation highlights the need to address structural inequalities to foster an environment where resilience can thrive, even though individual and cultural strengths are important. The interplay between socio-economic hardship and trauma suggests that resilience is not merely an individual trait but a reflection of the systemic support or lack thereof available to the child.

Recommendations for the study

- ❖ The government should increase funding and resources dedicated to child protection services, ensuring that foster care systems are well-monitored and that abused children receive timely interventions.
- ❖ The department should implement regular training programs for foster parents and social workers, focusing on trauma-informed care and identifying signs of abuse to better support vulnerable children.
- ❖ Policymakers should review and strengthen legislation related to foster care, ensuring that laws prioritize the safety, well-being, and long-term resilience of foster children through accountability and support frameworks.

Conclusion

Foster children in South Africa endure severe psychological trauma and long-lasting consequences from abuse, as the study's findings highlight. According to the findings of the study, children who have experienced abuse frequently struggle with anxiety, depression, identity confusion, and broken attachments for a long time after leaving the abusive environment. The foster care system urgently needs trauma-informed strategies that prioritize long-term mental health support while acknowledging the difficulties of psychological recovery, as these experiences demonstrate. Without focused treatments that tackle the exacerbated effects of trauma and foster care instability, children are more likely to carry unresolved pain into adulthood, which will hinder their ability to recover and develop as individuals. The study shows how vulnerability and resilience are greatly influenced by the weight of socioeconomic adversity and obstacles to receiving support services. The study discussed the experiences navigating a disjointed and underfunded care system, where support was frequently rendered ineffective by undertrained professionals and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Their vulnerability to harm was exacerbated by poverty and structural inequality, which also restricted their access to social mobility, high-quality healthcare, and education. Despite these difficulties, many foster children demonstrated incredible fortitude, finding strength in their cultural identity, personal agency, and community support. A comprehensive response is required considering these findings, one that tackles the wider socioeconomic factors that contribute to vulnerability

in addition to reforming the child welfare system. Ultimately, fostering resilience in this population requires a holistic, intersectional approach that centers the voices and lived realities of foster children who have endured abuse.

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