Learning from young people in Port Harcourt and Bayelsa, Nigeria, about their experiences of depression: a discussion space report

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Forward

Recently, we[7] reported a morning-long discussion (held 7th February 2023) that we held with a group of youth currently living in Johannesburg, South Africa, and self-identifying as Black African (Levine et al., 2023). Black African young people in South Africa typically have the least access to mental health supports, given South Africa's Apartheid history and ongoing racialised inequity. We wanted to understand their lived experiences and observations of the risks and influences that make African young people vulnerable to elevated levels of depression (i.e., strong feelings of hopelessness, despondency, and sadness). While young people can experience other mental health challenges, our narrow interest in depression was prompted by the knowledge that youth depression is a global emergency, particularly in under-resourced contexts such as Africa (Sankoh et al., 2018), and that African youth are typically under-represented in mental health studies (Steel et al., 2022). Given our long-standing and enduring attention to human resilience since the early 2010s (Theron, 2016; Theron et al., 2013; Theron & Ungar, 2023; Ungar, 2011, 2018, 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020), we were also

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interested in learning what young people believed might support youth resilience to mitigate or counter these risks. Finally, we were curious about young people's thoughts on the value of an empirical study that would produce insight into how best to protect young people living in Africa against elevated levels of depression.

We repeated this discussion with young people living in Nigeria. While Nigeria is geographically distant from South Africa, the countries share many commonalities. Amongst many other similarities, both countries have a history of colonisation, high levels of socioeconomic inequality, and widespread poverty. With regard to youth depression, neither country has readily accessible youth mental health services even though at least one in three young people in both countries is not in education, training or employment (NEET). Being classified as NEET places young people at pronounced risk for psychological distress, including depression (Cieslik et al., 2022; de Lannoy & Mudiriza, 2019).

Discussion space

The discussion took place on 27 May 2023. It was attended by 9 young people (6 young men; 3 young women) all black Africans aged between 18-25 and living in Port Harcourt and Bayelsa states in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Port Harcourt and Bayelsa are among the most impacted areas in the Niger Delta in terms of oil and gas related environmental destruction and associated youth restiveness. It was convened by the Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre (YEAC). YEAC is a nongovernmental and not for profit organisation that works to advance environment, livelihoods and indigenous rights, climate action and renewable energy, human rights and peace-building, sensitization and empowerment, anti-corruption and good governance.

YEAC uses a gender and human rights approach to ensure its activities empower people and leave no one behind. These organisations invited participants (who are currently making use of their services) to join in the conversation, based on their availability and proximity to the meeting venue. Nine young people (from approximately 15 that were invited) accepted. It was not possible to invite a larger number due to security concerns related to the build-up to the elections coming up in Nigeria. Two YEAC facilitators, i.e., Fyneface Dumnamene and Philip Godfrey, also attended the discussion. Zainab Mai-Bornu, Linda Theron, and Michael Ungar represented the team that co-authored the first discussion paper (Levine et al., 2023). They joined in the discussion virtually (using Zoom) from their respective countries (the UK, South Africa, and Canada).

After welcoming the young people and asking them to introduce themselves, we introduced ourselves and explained our reasons for convening the conversation (including the 'African youth resilience to depression study' we were wanting to propose). We explained that our conversation would revolve around three distinct questions:

1. What puts youths in the Niger Delta at risk for high levels of depression?
2. Who/what helps youth in the Niger Delta to avoid becoming very depressed?

3. Will our proposed study be valuable to youth in Nigeria and if so/not, how come?

To share their insights relating to these questions, the young people participating in the study divided into two groups (one for Bayelsa and one for Port Harcourt). Each group was facilitated by one of the attending representatives of YEAC. The groups preferred to have off-camera conversations relating to each question before sharing their insights and to do so question by question. To that end, they chose to converse with one another for about 15 minutes about question 1, before unmuting and relaying their insights. Each young person contributed to this feedback. The same process was followed for the remaining questions. When the young people had shared their experiences and observations, Mai-Bornu, Theron, and Ungar each expressed appreciation for their rich contributions. They reassured the young people that much of what they were sharing resonated with what young people in the South African conversation had said, and with young people that Linda and Michael had been privileged to talk with in Canada, other parts of South Africa, and other countries where they had undertaken resilience studies.

At the close of the conversation, thanks and acknowledgements were shared. The young people participating and the YEAC facilitators then enjoyed lunch. As a token of our appreciation, we also compensated young people for their travel expenses.

Challenges

In response to our first question, the young people and their facilitators outlined five themes that were causing them/local youth in their communities to be at risk of depression at this point in their lives. This feedback could be consolidated into five themes.

1. Socioeconomic inequality

The Niger Delta is solely responsible for over 90 percent of the country's foreign exchange income, through crude oil extraction and exportation, thereby making it the most strategic region upon which the national economy relies (Ikein, 2009). The disconnection between the economic wealth and advantage of the region and the quantum of resources expended on its overall development, has over time established structural imbalances in the area (Mai-Bornu, 2019, 2020). The action and inaction of the central Nigerian state, and its failure to guarantee the equitable and impartial allocation of those resources, has led to various reactions with an emphasis on youth restiveness and militancy (Afinotan and Ojakorotu, 2009; Ekong et al. 2013).

This regional context certainly resonated with the young people with whom we engaged. Poverty and socioeconomic inequalities represented major challenges to their mental health, with specific mention of depression-associated distress (e.g., hopelessness and despondency). For example, the lack of financial means to complete their education and a feeling of related impotence, especially when their families were unable to support the completion of their education or for instance pay school fees

(e.g., when fathers were deceased or absent) were highlighted by all the participating young people. In such cases, some of the youths are not able to communicate their distress to their parents because they cannot solve their problems. The Youth also expressed that even when financial opportunities come along, young people from better resourced families have the advantage (e.g., they are better socially and economically positioned/connected to benefit). Young people explained that on the one hand they find themselves living in a region that feels marginalized and unfairly treated by the government in terms of its development, and on the other, they feel doubly affected because of their own personal and family circumstances (i.e., not only by the historical and structural issues but also by the lack of individual financial resources exacerbated by regional and household poverty).

2. Poor access to, and quality of, education

The young people expressed a desire to go to school. Sometimes this was possible, and for others it was not.

> ...the slightest things got me upset and all I wanted at that point was to just go into school. The fact that so many persons were also kind of part of the reasons why I couldn't go to school...It really got me at the point I went into depression, I did not want to say anything. I even almost took my life, it was that bad. Very bad. And I'm like, why is it that every time I want to get something my turn is always this and, that. I have a sister that got into school, she's studying law, and the way they treat her in the house...treating her like she's heaven and all that stuff. I couldn't get to school and all that....So it really got me depressed. Right now, all I want is to just go into school. (Female 1)

> I took JAMB [The Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board examination must be taken before getting admission into universities in Nigeria] last year, but I didn't get admission. I applied for supplementary from the gave me another course altogether from what I actually wanted to study. And most of my mates got admission last year but I did not get admission, that really got me into depression. (Male 2)

> ...after the secondary school process I was in my SS3, there was no money for me to register for the West Africa examination known as WEAC, there was no money for me to register for that, so I left that. Up to data I have not written that, so I'm still struggling to make my way to write my WAEC [West African Examination Council] I finished secondary school 2020. (Male 3)

Some of the young people in the study were distressed by the quality of education available to them. They were distressed, for example, because in some public schools/colleges the teachers/lecturers fail to show up for classes.

> While in the process of going to the secondary school I attended a government school and process of learning was a bit tricky too because our teachers if I may say, they don't usually come to class, so we as students we just do is to gather ourselves and our peers to start doing competition to see what we could make for

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ourselves like the learning process. And it has really made the reading and spelling aspect more difficult for us because we did not have good education... (Male 3)

For some that are in school attendance is affected by hunger which stops some of them participating in class activities.

...now imagine a person who has not eaten going to school and has seen his peer group buying food when you go to school all you just have to do is just to drink garri and water and thank God- What You See Is What You Eat - so it made me feel depressed when my mates are talking in class, I don't usually use to speak, I just keep quiet... (Male 3)

Overall, going to school with an empty stomach and coming face to face with children from affluent families, in most cases with money to buy food during lunch breaks, impacted negatively on the young people we engaged with. Although some form of government school feeding program is in existence, it did not seem that our participants were benefitting from this.

3. Family

Like the poverty theme, the issues highlighted in the family theme related to the loss of the household breadwinner and youth then having to go out and fend for themselves. The youths we engaged with referred to struggles/ hustling to make ends meet, and related psychological distress, when their families were unable to support them.

My first depression came when my dad died the last six years ago. We did not have a lot of money even feeding was kind of tough for us... Most of my friends their dad has money, their Mum's have money... they will be enjoying themselves buying what ever they want ... but I don't have anybody that will do that. And that is putting me into depression. (Male 1)

As a growing man, you have to do everything to be successful.

When I was 11 years my parents late in motor accident and I am living with my uncle...We are very depressed no work nothing to do we only cultivate - farming - just to make survival for other people. My education ended at primary six, no money to fund my education... .And when I see my younger ones... and my classmate going ahead of me sometimes I feel like oh god, why am I in this world? Life has been so hard, only God knows how we survive everyday. (Male 5)

For a small number of our discussants, family could also be a source of pressure.

...we actually almost got admission but because I was asked to study a course what wasn't what I actually applied for, ...I was so depressed, I was actually almost giving up on the course, because that was not what I wanted for myself and people were also telling me that's not good for you (Female 3)

In summary, young people without financial support from their family are forced to fend for themselves and even pay for their education. In some cases, parents choose to educate younger ones while the older children are made to take care of these younger siblings. While this is a major contributory factor that pushes young people into criminal activities, such as kidnapping, and cultism activities (Osaghae et al., 2011), young people who spoke with us associated their resource-constrained families with personal hopelessness and despair.

4. Peer pressure

Almost all the participating youth referred to peer pressure and how, in their experience, this was a major cause of depression in the region. Young people who were very poor tended to keep to themselves because they see their friends making progress while they were not; this made them feel inferior. This, as they explained, pushes some of the youth to engage in criminal activities due to the need for fast money. Some spoke about having suicidal feelings due to these pressures. Some of the youths referred to the use of pretence, as in they pretended to be happy on the outside, when in reality they are actually broken and sad on the inside.

> *... and peer pressure and all that, my friends, ... I don't know they did it ... but we finished together, most of them were in their final year. I felt how is this possible, your friends, you were in the same class and finally they are so ahead of you... you feel that you are not in the same class with them, they stop communicating with you and all that stuff... (female 1)*

> *When you find out that there are no opportunities to pursue... see others out there and life is going on very well for them, they have the funds and they can cater for their needs and you are there still trying to gather funds for yourself... Through the information we get on the internet, we see celebrities on the internet, we see that life is going on easy for them and we start to compare ourselves... why am I still stagnant while others are making it... (Male 1)*

> *Most of your friends when they have admission, they will be sending you videos and chatting you up, how school stuff are going, how they are taking lectures and other things, which will be putting you through a lot of depression (Male 2)*

> *My mates are in school and when they call you asking you never enter school, we say o boy no money o, we are in the village living the village life, just roaming about... A friend of mine asked me not to call him until I am in school, that made me feel very depressed... and even if you have a problem, you cannot communicate with your parents, there is nothing they can do, they always tell you to endure and work .... They will make you feel inferior ... So even when I have problems I keep it to myself ... (Male 3)*

5. Disenchantment with the establishment and associated challenges of inequitable resources

The young people expressed dissatisfaction with the actions of the government. They feel ignored by the state because in their experience they are not getting any support from their state governments.

> *And I will plead to you if you can, if you people can do anything to enhance our government schools, I would plead to you that you do it because we don't have quality education. How can you call a person and the person does not know how to spell his or her name, it is very poor and a shameful thing for our future generation and to our government. (Male 3)*

> *The society is pushing us out and we see the rich ones reading what we are supposed to be reading in the school and we are at home doing nothing ... And even when government bring opportunity for the poor to go to school, the rich ones will just corner side and put their people because they are all rich... we do not have any option because our parents they are poor...(Female 3)*

> *Even in football clubs, if your parents do not have money, they do not put you to play a match, they do not look at what we can do for the club or the country... I had to leave the club and go back to the village in Bayelsa. We do not get good encouragement from the government. (Male 4)*

This has led to a lot of unhappiness among young people and a sense of hopelessness.

> *Bullying is a major problem in our communities ...let me just share an instance for you, you know, in our community, you don't have good water to drink. And I remember prof when you visited you saw our river, you see how polluted the river is. So, you have to now go to the one you refer as a maybe an upper class or middle class, you have to go to the resident to get some of these drinking water and sometimes they just chase everybody away. You know, the same thing with lights. We don't have lights in our community for you to have light you have to charge your phone. You have to use light for all that. I remember like [name of other discussant] does laundry, he has a laundry and he knows what he's passing through just to...to sustain that business just like as he said the business has crashed because you use big money to buy fuel and you pay rent, how much are they charging you for it? (Male 4)*

In conclusion, it is safe to add that the distinction between the rich and the poor young people is clear not only in the Niger Delta but throughout Nigeria. Bullying, poor service delivery, and other forms of oppression are experienced by young people especially those form less privileged back grounds as seen in the examples given above about the lack of sources of energy that help people make ends meet through running small business for survival.

Resilience-enabling resources

The young people offered four resources/strategies that they felt were important in managing the risk of depression, even under especially challenging (sometimes chronic) stressors.

1. Positive thoughts and enabling beliefs

Young people believed that their own recognition and acceptance of not being in a good state of mind is the first step towards dealing with depression. They told us that life is all about the survival of the fittest. So as a youth, it was important to understand what life is all about and to believe that the hardest times could be survived. The young women participants shared their belief that it was important not to let one minute of sadness affect your whole life. They emphasized that it was necessary to realise that progress/moving on was non-negotiable regardless of whatever had happened.

> *And another thing that also brought me out of this depression was I met one of...one like a very well-to-do man. He told me something that I will never forget. He said to me because he noticed I was always sad. I was not always myself...So he said to me that I should not let my one-minute affect [past] ... - like my previous time - affects my present. (Female 3)*

> *I try to stay around people not keeping to myself when I am sad, I also try to remain happy so I do not get int more depression. (Female 1)*

All the youths referred to spirituality, in terms of the support and comfort they get from engaging in religious acts (e.g., praying in churches and reading the Bible). Pastors in some of the churches served as a source of motivation to the youth and actively encouraged them to have resilience enabling beliefs. Listening to motivational speakers and/or reading inspirational books was also thought to be another source of powerful beliefs that could support them to avoid/manage depression.

> *I go to church. The Bible is very important when it comes to depression, because the word of God is just like everything, He has everything in it. He tells us about everything, literally everything, so ninety nine percent of our lives depend on it. So I listen to the teachings and I get myself, like, I com... I comfort myself with the teachings I hear everyday. I also listen to other motivational speakers that talk about how they overcame depression ...(Female 2)*

To keep their thoughts positive and to focus on thoughts that enabled/comforted, some youth spoke about avoiding discussions about the challenges they face. Even when some family members or friends bring up discussions on their stressors, they tended to take the lead by changing the discussion to another general subject that was more positive.

> *...our life is always a game you have to push through, no matter what even if you come down. Even if you come down today you should know that tomorrow you have to rise up but by all means, and it is within your own power to rise up by all means, because if you accept, if you're down on yourself, you accept that you are down, that means you are a failure and you have actually lost out. So you need to work on your mind personally as a person, you need to work on your mind. Grow Your mind. Listen to good informations every single day. At least when you wake up you need to pray, those things to grow your mind, read*

books, listen to good information, follow good people, do things to engage your mind, positive things, always do positive things to grow your mind. (Male 1)

2. Good food, music and social media

Engaging in social media supported hope. Seeing successful people sharing their stories on how they made progress in life helped some of the young people stay positive. For example, how they made it "from grass to grace" inspired young people to keep going despite the odds.

I overcome my depression is when I listen to music. People like Lucky Dube, Timaya Tu Baba, I listen to their music. And if I watch the story of how to make it from, from grass to grace, also give me motivation that if they could...can make it, 'cause they started from nothing and they became something, so if they could make it then I could make it also by the grace of God. (Male 4)

Listening to "cool music", as the youths explained, helped to distract them and take their minds off their problems. Music also elevated their mood. Feeling joyful, as one explained, can ease depression.

So I was able to fight it by moving away from conversations, listening to cool music, and when I'm alone staying joyful can also ease depression because when you're joyful, you don't have time to start thinking on things that get you really depressed. (Female 2)

3. Supportive relationships

Young people with a supportive family, tended to seek advice from their mothers or fathers and a few close relatives, especially when they are down. When families followed the African tradition of family meetings it was especially easy to seek help and advice from parents/elders.

As a teenager, you should seek for more advices. I can use myself as an example, I always have like, we always have family in my house. My mom most especially she normally gives us more advices concerning daily lives and concerning like, what...what life has to offer to us the good and the bad, the do's and the don'ts .... (Female 2)

However, there were those that pushed away from families because the support was simply not there. They were expected to be strong and continue struggling in order to survive their ordeals. In their own cases, they acknowledged that seeking out supportive company, rather than being alone, was a good strategy to help with avoiding depression. Staying around people, especially positive, supportive people, helped youths stay happy and hopeful.

Mentors were also identified as a good source of supportive relationships. Identifying and following good mentors helped youths to change how they thought and felt about themselves and their lives. They told us that working on emotions/learning to manage

emotion is a very important thing to do, especially if one's natural inclination was to be too emotional (e.g., to be easily upset).

> *The church has been a source of motivation, like I do attend Salvation Ministry, and my Pastor is more or less the motivational speaker. And still a minister is more or less my mentor, and he gives me more motivations to do things. Thank you. (Male 4)*

Recreational activities, including playing football, were referred to as good ways to avoid depression especially when they provided opportunity to connect with others and be active together.

> *I play football and I like watching match. So most of the times when I feel depressed, I just go and play football…free my mind and do other things…. (Male 3)*

Similar to what we found among the youth we engaged with in South Africa, young people in the Niger Delta also use sports, music, mentorship and social media as means of escape and sources of positive thoughts.

4. Avoiding crime and violence

Some young people referred to the importance of avoiding violence, also violent self-harm. This included dismissing any thoughts of killing themselves as well as moving away from criminal activities in their communities. The Niger Delta is recognised as a major bedrock of violent conflicts during which the youth are always at the forefront of agitations. In our research discussion young people recognised and shared communicated that involvement in such disturbances and other criminal/violent activities was not only inherently dangerous, but also dangerous to their wellbeing.

> *I even had the option to go into internet fraud, but I saw that was not the best measure, like stealing someone's money was not a good measure, so I left that and decided the best thing was just to wait on God and see what he can do. Someone told me about a programme for people that have not finished their secondary school. (Male 3)*

> *Whenever you don't have money you have to be very careful with your conscience so you do not take the wrong path (Male 5)*

> *You have to work on your emotions, if you follow your emotions you will get into problems. you have to be a logical person in life. You have to think out of the box, you have to think with your brain not your emotions. (Male 1)*

The value of a study on resilience to depression

The response from participants to the third study question was positive in terms of the value of our project to the youth in the Niger Delta. They told us that such a study will help to get young people out of depression as it will produce results that can be used to help more of them to develop enabling habits and thoughts. The conversation also indicated to us that further work needs to be done to unpick the meaning of terms like

'depression' for young people in the Niger Delta, particularly in the context of post-colonial mental healthcare. While this was out of scope for this particular focus group, it is something that would need to explored sensitively and in co-creative ways with young people.

Others commented that this study, with a focus on African youth, is what the world needs now because it would bring attention to their voices and perspectives. They also thought that this would result in more engagement with youths to get them to do positive things, as against concentrating on the negative aspects associated with African youth. They would like the proposed study to provide them with a sense of community/safe space where they can share what is on their minds. They felt that this will make the youth in the Niger Delta feel loved and validated.

Conclusion

Our exploratory conversation with these young people from the Niger Delta was a powerful reminder that there are multiple (mostly systemic) challenges to their mental health. While African youth have some very insightful and creative ideas of how to manage those challenges, and are supported as much as possible by organisations like YEAC, there seems to be an over-emphasis on personal responsibility including to seek help from family, learn to manage so-called negative emotion, and avoid crime and violence. Expanding these strategies in culturally appropriate ways that include multiple role players and multiple systems is overdue. Thus, the conclusion from the conversation with Nigerian young people is that it fits with the learning and outcomes of the original conversation with South African young people: there is indeed a pressing need to develop a wider future study of multisystemic resilience to depression with Africa(n) young people.

In addition, some of the less socially appropriate ways of coping with ongoing exposure to risk (e.g., engaging in crime) is a timely reminder of the importance of research studies that investigate enabling pathways of resilience when younq people are challenged by unemployment, poor education opportunities, and intergenerational poverty. Not pursuing such research agendas would be tantamount to sustaining atypical and less salutary ways of coping with the risks associated with elevated depression outcomes. Finally, despite its brevity (i.e., a single conversation at a given point in time), our exploratory conversation showed that young people are keen to talk about their lived experience of risks and what supports resilience to those risks. We will learn much about how to minimise these risks and maximise resilience if future studies position African young people as knowledge producers and engage them in iterative, discursive conversational spaces.

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