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“We Can Manage This Corona Disaster”: Psycho-Social Experiences of a Diverse Suburban Middle-Class Community in South Africa: Interview-Based Study

Susanne Jacobs 

Faculty of Health Sciences, COMPRES (Community Psychosocial Research), CCYC (Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies), North-West University, Potchefstroom 2520, South Africa; susanne.jacobs@nwu.ac.za

Abstract: The study concerns psycho-social domains experienced in a diverse suburban middle-class community, reporting the most positive cases and the deepest suffering, and interactions towards adaptation in stressful situations, such as the Coronavirus pandemic. This qualitative investigation used a descriptive design, with a strengths-based perspective directing a two-phased method. Through non-probability convenience sampling, 80 participants completed a web-based qualitative questionnaire (phase one). From those, 20 purposely selected volunteers participated in individual, face-to-face, open-ended, and unstructured interviews (phase 2). Themes, interpreted as one set, show how strengths and resilience appear, despite extreme shock and uncertainty. Transitional processes in psycho-social spheres reveal conscious decisions towards dynamic engagement, embracing change, reflecting on life's value, and regarding novel meaningful priorities in contrast with “before”. Most prominent relational spaces have human connections in the inner (close) and outer (community) circles. Personal, meaningful relationships strengthen social bonds. Appreciative inquiry (AI) assisted in the transitional process to co-construct awareness of the positive core, emotional agility, and pride in embracing and expanding on newly developed strengths. Interpreted inductively, meaning described in abstracted knowledge can be transferred to and integrated with other contexts, identifying new initiatives and trans-, multi-, and inter-disciplinary debates mitigating psycho-social consequences and fostering resilience during disasters.



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1. Introduction

The global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic state of disaster and public health emergency of international concern forced strict and extended lockdown and isolation [1] to inhibit the spread and to create barriers to interpersonal interaction. For this study, ‘corona’ refers to COVID-19.

Consequential to the dramatic life-changing milieu, exogenous shock, existential crises, and experiences of deep suffering appear—uncertainty, fear, anxiety, self-doubt, and mental health issues—thus, vulnerability emerges. Uncertain outcomes, common to epidemics, generate higher negative emotional states of stress, nervousness, uneasiness, and insecurity [2]. An online survey conducted in April 2020 with a diverse group of 1200 respondents reported that 92% felt stressed [3]. Anger and aggression against the government, children, spouses, partners, and family members increased, and intimate partner violence rose [4].

Complex and multifaceted post-lockdown tensions include finances, stigma, short-term relief, guilt, social packages, testing positive, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), faster and more intrusive workplace habits, blurred boundaries, continued digitisation, and facing the world again [5].

The global research focus was mainly quantitative, oriented towards statistics, spread, physical health-related challenges, and economic status [6]. Qualitative research, which is more difficult to conduct, may result in fragmented outcomes [7]. It is more difficult to measure challenges experienced by those who deal with constant fear, worry, uncertainties and stressors [5]. However, the WHO [2,6] emphasises the psycho-social well-being of individuals and the collective, researching the way in which psycho-social spheres interact when under pressure to survive. Scientific inquiry into the ever-increasing mental and psycho-social health recovery is necessary to mitigate the consequences under pandemic and disaster conditions [6].

Psycho-social denotes connection and interaction between psychological aspects, including thoughts (cognition), emotions (affection), spirituality (meaning), behaviour, and social experiences (relationships, traditions, culture) [8].

The pandemic affects a whole nation's population differently based on various social conditions. Specific sections have differing experiences [9]. Much emphasis is on the poor, homeless, and vulnerable [10]. Less focus, also indicating the gap in research, is on the "forgotten" middle-class who have explicit issues relating to income and employment, and experience deep suffering and mental health issues. All groups need mental health attention, just of different types.

A global disaster, such as a pandemic, with the virus as a communal enemy, could reduce depression, as communities may show awareness of strengths, altruism, cooperation, and pride in being useful [11]. Holmes et al. [9] recommend elevating and embedding fundamental psycho-social principles, including hope, safety, calm, and social connectedness. Self-and-community efficacy can be made possible by exploring and amplifying accounts of positive and hopeful stories and images of local people who have recovered or supported others. Such accounts have not been adequately voiced, shared, and documented.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) uses strengths-based questions and stories to open the possibilities life offers, inquiring about how people support each other and allowing individuals to find new roads through challenging times [12,13]. Moreover, AI can accelerate learning, creativity, and capacity for change [14,15]. From a strengths-based favourable position, AI, instead of addressing the current one-sided quantifiable state of knowledge, speaks to psycho-social experiences. AI uses generative listening, guided reflection, active researcher responses, supporting co-construction of solutions, diligent practice of resilience and emotional agility. The target was a small South African middle-class community in 2020.

Research has not explored psycho-social experiences through the interrelatedness of (1) the strengths-based approach (SBA), (2) AI, and (3) exactly how a calamity contributes to the unlocking of resilience, especially of the middle-class.

From the above, the absence is that of qualitative research studies on the psychosocial well-being of individuals and the collective on psycho-social health recovery, especially of middle-class people. Not heard or documented enough are stories, and not reported is research on the interrelatedness of the strengths-based approach, AI, and how the calamity contributes to the unlocking of resilience,

Therefore, the question is: what are the psycho-social experiences of a small, diverse suburban middle-class community in South Africa?

1.1. Aims and Objectives

From a qualitative perspective, the goal is to explore how psycho-social domains interact towards adaptation in stressful situations such as Corona, as experienced in a diverse suburban middle-class environment reporting the most positive Corona cases, causing deep suffering. The objectives guiding the study are to:

1. Explore interactions between cognitive, affective, spiritual, behavioural, and social domains in stressful and adverse situations.
2. Describe psycho-social interactions and their relations to strengths and resilience in stressful and adverse situations.

3. Use AI strengths-based questions to assist in the process.
4. Inform practice about transferal to other social science contexts.

This diverse middle-class group is representative of numerous communities in South Africa. It is necessary to achieve the objectives of exploring and understanding psycho-social interactions emanating from experiences after the pandemic, as the effects on other social-economic and diverse groups could be better understood. Differences and similarities create meaning and validate lives.

Through AI, participants sense value. The opportunity to verbally construct what is right by voicing and sharing experiences through success stories inspires transformation towards appreciation for ambitions, values, hopes, and dreams [16]. Creswell [17] recognises that data collection should endeavour to open avenues to participate in the start of a social change process.

Advanced understanding is valuable, as it could help to identify new initiatives and research alleviating adverse effects during disasters and amplify community [18] and appreciative resilience. In practice, it means transferal to other social sciences contexts and integrating trends across disciplines.

1.2. Background and Theory

Of importance is the psycho-social functioning (the cognitive, emotional, and psychological components) of individuals, organisations, or larger social systems. Social functioning comprises mental health, life transactions, role performance, change, crisis, communication, and relationship difficulties, encompassing individual interaction with others in its entirety and at all levels of existence [19].

When faced with adversity, significant stress, and challenges, individuals and systems often display an interrelation with positive attitudes, resilience, and strengths through an ability to cope with whatever life throws at them [12,20]. Therefore, the point of departure for this study focuses on the interrelatedness of resilience, SBAs, and the conceptual framework of AI leading to behaviour transformation.

Focusing on strengths does not mean ignoring challenges or turning struggles into strengths [21]. The SBA is unique in that it is client-led, collaborative, and centred on outcomes, using individual and environmental future sets of strengths for controlling change [21,22]. Using SBA allows individuals to see themselves according to their values by just being and moving the value forward to capitalise on strengths, rather than negative characteristics. Using SBA counters passivity by supporting co-production [21], acknowledgement, and verbalisation [23].

Moreover, focusing on strengths introduces and moulds individuals into being resilient. Resilience generates added benefits, like feeling unique and valued, being optimistic, and understanding that life is a journey [24]. Furthermore, multiple complex and diverse explanations underpin the phenomenon of ‘resiliency’, focusing on protective functions. Resilience entails many aspects of an individual’s life, facilitated by multiple promotive and protective factors and processes, positively affecting various systemic levels [25]. For instance, after adversity, resilience is primarily fostered by processes of system recovery, including interactions occurring within and between multiple systems, which range from individual biology to psychological, relational, sociocultural, institutional, and ecological mechanisms [26]. More specifically, system recovery entails thriving, drawing from inner sources perceived in problem-solving, meaning-making, self-regulation, endurance, action, mastery of a social skill, tenacity, intelligence, and social ecology [25–27]. Individuals become change agents to assemble strength, dignity, capacity, value, growth, self-determination, resourcefulness, positivity, and future focus to become a reality [22].

Related to the SBA and resilience, AI (to value and appreciate) [16] is open to what is not working and damaged but shifts the focus towards what is working [22,28]. The appreciative eye sees what is good, better, and possible.

This study, needing data about systems functioning by inquiring about personal and communal experiences, used the appreciative perspective, which is most effective

where “narrative-rich communication”, such as stories of hope, is encouraged [16,20]. As conversation can be ‘fateful’, AI focuses on positive outcomes, strengths, and growth opportunities, removing the emphasis on anxiety, depression, and self-doubt [16]. By discovering what works in a system, people might envision a changed, better, and desired future [29–31], since change begins with the first question.

Motivated by a supportive, positive environment, stories of hope—open, natural, dynamic—provide rich responses to inquiries [31] and a representation of the facts of a situation that, during and because of difficult times, help sustain, as well as inspire, looking forward with desire, reasonable confidence, and belief [13]. The individual is enabled to reframe the personal narrative and grow as a person through challenges. Information shared using personal stories is more accurate than merely asking participants to list strengths. Stories about places encompass emotional connections and memories, and foster belonging [32].

2. Materials and Methods

This section provides the South African context of the middle-class where this study occurred. Following that are descriptions of the design, data collection, analysis, and results. Three main themes, supported by verbatim quotes, are followed by the discussion, limitations, and conclusion

2.1. Research Design

Context

The study focused on a suburban middle-class community in Gauteng, the smallest but most crowded province in South Africa (SA), reporting the most Corona cases (June 2020: 6000 deaths and March 2022: 100,000 deaths).

SA, a developing country [33], is rich in diversity, with a mix of cultures and languages and an estimated population of 58.78 million. The black Africans, a majority of 48.4 million, constitute 81% of the total; Whites, 4.7 million; Coloureds, 5.2 million; and the Indian/Asian population, 1.5 million [34]. Inundated with socio-structural and systemic challenges and extreme inequality, half of the families in SA are impoverished [35]. SA was deeply affected by Corona, as most households lost at least one person contributing to income [5], and it launched possibly the most extensive social welfare-relief program in its history to help vulnerable and impoverished people.

A notable portion of society that shared values, had relative financial stability and good quality of life, and expected to pass these on to its offspring, was the middle-class (6 million) [36]. It has become challenging to conceptualise the ‘conventional middle-class’, since the lockdown may have moved the boundaries further. Income has declined by 17% over the past five years due to inflation [33]. All sectors and groups have felt the effects, but “households below the poverty line” have increased in numbers dramatically. Of the middle-class, 34% of families fell increasingly behind and into vulnerability [36], suggesting that the proportion of the population experiencing poverty with some regularity may be greater than Stats SA’s 55% figure [37]. Many families feel the pinch and fall through the cracks due to reduced salaries, working hours, and forced unpaid leave. Kiewit [36] states that “a deep recession awaits the country”.

The vulnerable middle-class, slipping in and out of poverty in response to positive and negative shocks, is predicted to become poor in the future. “The decline of 3.5% in formal sector employment hit middle-income households the hardest, as many permanently employed workers have had to transition to contractual or informal employment” [33].

2.2. Middle-Class Consumers

The middle-class consumers:

- are a small number who carry a heavy tax burden—despite a population of 60 million, 3.4 million people pay 91.8% of all tax [34]; (Decile 10 is 42.5%.nts);
- do not qualify for government grants;

- experience an increase in multigenerational living, as many, no longer able to afford the cost of living alone, are downscaling by combining households to share living expenses—a trend seen across the country;
- are also less likely to work from home, implying that soaring fuel prices would have a disproportionately negative impact.

Participants represent: a combination of families and diverse cultures located in Centurion, in Gauteng, unique and diverse regarding nationality, financial resources (primarily vulnerable to middle-class), multigenerational and intergenerational family systems, whole family units, extended family, single parent, and merged households, as well as societal groups related by blood (kinship), and non-biological families in the immediate vicinity. ‘Person/s-in-the-family or environment’ form an ecosystem, interrelating between subsystems and mutually reciprocal relationships [19]. Characteristics include numerous initiatives in support of benefits to the community to curb the effects of the pandemic and lockdown.

2.2.1. Design

A qualitative research approach is most appropriate for a naturalistic investigation [17]. The aim is to understand how psycho-social domains, as experienced in the context of a suburban diverse middle-class reporting the most positive cases and the deepest suffering, interact towards adaptation in stressful situations. Using a qualitative descriptive design, directed by an appreciative process allowed us the opportunity to explore psycho-social experiences within the Corona period, which, according to Creswell [17], is a social and human problem.

2.2.2. Data Collection

After ethical clearance (HREC- NWU-00160-21-S1), data collection commenced. The data collection period was one year into Corona, pre-vaccination in SA, just before the third wave, about experiences during and after the first wave. The literature search used electronic databases from November 2020 to May 2021.

The sample was drawn from a purposefully selected population living in the Centurion area, which is characteristic of a small suburban diverse middle-class community and reported the most positive cases in the country. The aim was maximum variation sampling to bring in diversity. Inclusion criteria required 18+-year-old Afrikaans or English-speaking participants who have been residents in the area during the lockdown, possess computer skills, and have access to the internet and Google platforms.

The empirical investigation used a two-phase approach, integrating different qualitative data sources to promote and complement methodological variety for richness [17]. The first phase used an online/electronic web-based questionnaire to enhance inclusiveness and diversity, requiring biographical data and written responses to qualitative fill-in questions. The second phase used in-person one-on-one interviews, responding to unstructured questions.

Participation entailed the completion of a web-based survey and participating in a face-to-face interview. Advertisements on notice boards, community Facebook channels, leaflets, newspaper announcements, and in emails provided equal opportunities to potential voluntary participants. Non-probability convenience sampling relies on data collection from conveniently available people, for example, Facebook polls [38]. Advantages of surveys include cost and time efficiency, versatility, coverage of the larger and broader population, variety of topics, ease of use, access, and faster turnaround time, with more truthful responses for a deeper understanding of phenomena [39]. Feedback in writing avoids the interference of an interviewer.

From 80 written fill-in responses gathered from April to June 2020, 30 volunteered to partake in a follow-up one-on-one interview, and 20 participants were selected. Participants not invited to verbal interviews were thanked for their willingness to participate. The 45 to 60 min in-person interviews took place in June 2021. Participants gave signed

informed consent before taking part and gave oral informed consent during the audio-recorded interviews, as required by the North-West University HREC ethics committee's preventative strategy of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality criteria [40]. The risks of involvement included recalling negative lived experiences needing further intervention (pre-arranging a counselling service).

2.2.3. Analysis

Biographical data of all contributors, representative of a suburban middle-class community, showed: ages 22 to 84, from White, Indian, and Black ethnicities, various physical abilities, religious and political beliefs, and lifestyles.

Interviewees included: sixteen females; four males; three from affluent socio-economic status; as well as a variety of occupations and experience: drama teacher; dance teacher; draftsman; social worker; student mechanical engineer; car engineer; specialist engineer; occupational therapist; medical doctor; preacher; artist; and community outreach workers. Family structures included:

- Whole-parent family unit households,
- Mothers,
- Homemakers,
- Six singles,
- Ten married,
- One never married,
- One divorcee,
- One widowed,
- Eight with children ranging from very small to adolescents,
- Extended families, such as grandparents and non-biological families in close vicinity.
- Participants experienced trauma: such as a death in the family; long COVID; six recovered from COVID; four lost somebody to COVID; and 13 had either lost a job themselves or one in the household.

Data saturation (achieved after 18 face-to-face interviews) is based on one overarching, open-ended, unstructured interview question with prompts.

Strengths-based appreciative questions, directing the method, included: "Please share your experiences or a story on your Corona journey", further probed with: "In what way was your life meaningful during Corona? What personal strengths did you discover that you were unaware of? What did you realize you needed to start doing/stop doing/do more of? What opportunities do you see emerging (or engaged in) from this Corona situation? How does your story influence your view of the future? What new connections did you make?"

Audio-visual recordings were transcribed verbatim, analysing data according to general guidelines entailing six phases as proposed by Braun and Clarke [41]: familiarising, generating initial codes, searching for, and reviewing themes, defining, and reporting.

During data collection, the analyst looked for patterns of meaning and items of potential interest in the data, emanating through natural language written from the beginning, field notes, ideas, and possible coding schemes. The end goal is to report the content, the meaning of themes, and abstract constructs identified before, in between, and after analysis, constantly moving back and forth between the entire data set. The analysis is not a linear process but recursive, over time, and not to be rushed [41].

Pseudonyms, differentiated as interviewee numbers (P1-20) ensure the anonymity of verbatim quotations.

3. Results

Firstly, the vivid interplay of processes across psycho-social domains is central. Thoughts affect emotions and assigned meaning, and vice versa; also, thoughts and emotions affect individual and social behaviours. Secondly, processes are transitional, with a strong before and after the element (life before the COVID shock; life after the initial

shock). Recurring in all interviews are themes about expression of awareness and acting on strengths. The analysis took place within the context of transitional and interplaying processes of strengths and resilience.

Processes interacting in psycho-social domains denote cognition (thoughts), affect (emotions) and meaning (also spiritual), as well as social experiences in relationships, traditions, and culture. These complex patterns revert to acting and changing behaviour. ‘Social’ interaction denotes adaptation to others in various situations, and ‘spiritual’ (being) to the individual’s sense of peace, purpose, connection, and beliefs about the meaning of life [42]. Significant to this study, besides awareness about the self, is the prioritization of social connections. Additionally significant is that the appreciative perspective fosters the process of adaptation and positive transformation.

3.1. Transitional Processes Vibrantly Interact across Thought and Feeling Spheres

Most participants accept and view the ‘changed’ situation as a “surmountable cross-road”. Throughout the pandemic, positive emotions occurred concurrently with negative emotions; negative thinking and feelings such as disappointment, sorrow, loneliness, and dysregulation were dominant. During an epidemic outbreak, positive and negative spiralling thinking and emotions interweave, interplay, and coexist [7]. Affective states may vary in several ways, including duration, intensity, specificity, pleasantness, and level of arousal, playing a critical role in regulating cognition, behaviour and social interactions [19].

Participants reveal how they decide and choose to embrace the ‘call for change’ in the ‘wicked circumstance’. Decisions go together with robust self-reflection and new connotations on the value of life in the past and future. When McArthur-Blair and Cockell [20] refer to an altered gaze on personal values, it denotes rethinking, reviewing, and renewing the self; to be able to freely choose buffers, bolsters, and builds. Participants now recognize and think about previous falsehoods, and consider novel and vigorous meaningful priorities affecting emotions, clear in remarks such as:

I will not think about the value of life again, this Corona has taught me a lesson. Freedom is not a given. Overnight everything changed- many balls fell- one of the biggest milestones of COVID is to accept what you cannot change, in conjunction with the fact that everyday looks different with new challenges (P3).

A transitional process takes place from initial struggles, such as new routines, time management, boundaries, balancing between work and leisure, and working alone with no feedback, towards seeing opportunities emerging.

Before COVID, I had a huge inner turmoil about life-work balance; I realize one can cope with less (P5). Know your principles, continue moving, and focus on priorities (P13). Instant gratification is not necessary; it does not matter to be the best in something; one can still achieve goals in the longer term (P9).

To bounce back requires rehabilitation towards a ‘new normal’.

Your limitations in your mind will determine how much you will get out of the situation (P17). I decided against returning to my comfort zone. I realized that my steering wheel is driving me down a cliff, I needed to turn it, and plan a new direction COVID sent me not a new direction- I talked, planned, conversed, and prayed, I decided that the situation will not get the better of me, resilience is a decision. (P8).

People are more resilient than they thought. A shifting view evokes the ability to manage change towards a more mindful execution of strengths. Thoughts play out in behavioural change, seen in the regrouping of choices and possibilities in daily living:

The longer this pandemic takes, the more we will be perfected, and time will work on the edges (P6). We are going to make it, I discovered more determination than I thought I had (P10). One of the most significant milestones is to accept what you cannot change, and every day looks different with new challenges (P15). Hardships kept us humble; we now realize that we are not perfect (P2).

Positive emotions gradually show stress tolerance, emotional regulation, compassion for self and others, optimism in the presence of obstacles, and appreciation.

This experience is bittersweet; so many lost livelihoods, but there are so many blessings (P5).

It takes toughness to leave the comfort zone and regroup your life..., but now I am proud (P17). Now you learn the value of money, no options to spend money- this is a lesson for children, but for me as an adult as well, we take the positiveness out of this situation (P16)

Participants spoke about regular and active reflection on life's value and meaning and asking deeper level questions about belief and spiritual grounding:

Dynamics changed; I need to answer questions that I never thought I had to (P4). There was more time to think about the creator's presence, providence, and answers to uncertainties, my belief played a prominent role in believing that God protects (P1). One cannot plan unforeseen events, one must rely stronger on God for provision and not worry about tomorrow, be thankful for today (P5). We are not asking the right deeper-level questions that will give people both insight and hope, I cry for people on the ventilators, we need to teach staff God is there, they must ask people before getting sedated, "are you ready?" (P3).

Some also questioned Christianity.

The world is looking at the true character of Christians, their words don't preach; their actions do, people "stir"; they now decide if they want to stand with Christians or with those in the storms... (P9). People believe that God is revenging and punishing through Corona; this message that God is a loving God is not yet out, that God does not condemn, and that it is irrelevant to God that you sinned (P18).

However, the awareness comes with guilt and mourning regarding the loss of precious time before the disaster.

I mourn the time I and everybody have lost, it should never be taken for granted, when it's gone its over forever. Now I say yes for every opportunity I get, every contact you have is more meaningful, it may be the last (10).

Recovery towards new positive realities involves interactive navigation in psycho-social domains. Pride in the expansion and transfer of newly discovered strengths leads to a stronger self [20]; it shows that continuous growth influences the perspective of life.

To be patient got another meaning—I learned another type of patience: to wait (P9). I had to split myself, in this roller coaster, first I had no control, I panicked... I realized that solid relationships and boundaries are very necessary to get through this . . . , because women are more stretched. My workload doubled- I have a better understanding of people's troubles, I have more compassion, more depth in conversations, I know my self-worth, because I know that I can manage (4).

To sum up: previously unknown personal strengths appear, especially under pressure. Conscious decisions, taken to sustain outcomes in actions, *make* dreams come true, and create new traditions, show the active resilience practice. Central to human interactions, emotions (affect) include values, appreciation, enthusiasm, motivations, and attitudes.

3.2. Transitional Processes Vibrantly Interact across Social Spheres

The lockdown period not only marked experiences such as stress, tension, and fear of the financial implications to come or contracting the virus, but also relational difficulties such as dealing with different personalities under one roof and emotional flare-ups:

It is stressful to cheer up the stressed (P17). My home was a war zone, I had to find a way to escape, I never realized how little I don't know my family and myself . . . (5) we are boxed in caged in, its no joke to cheer up the depressed, now we are forced to share the good, bad, ugly . . . (12). To stay in a safe place with all the troubles helps a great deal, boundaries shifted: save emotions for more urgent matters.

However, as seen in the next section, although continue relational difficulties were anticipated, the most meaningful and prominent spheres recurring is social functioning. Prioritising social connections (relationships, traditions, culture) results in conscious choices to order human relations in the inner (close) and outer (community/place) circles; therefore, behaviour changes to consciously planned and mindful actions. Reasonable efforts lead to restoring, preserving, and enhancing human connections, to robust kinship ties, and to creating new traditions [8,43].

Inner circle (spouses, children, family, friends):

The sense of togetherness versus a loss of personal contact and loneliness points toward a hunger for socialisation.

I needed to tell someone that the son of our housekeeper, only 19 died of COVID ... there was no-one ... I was so shocked ... I drove to the fuel station because that is the only place, I was allowed to go to... and told a total stranger... just to get it off my chest ... (P4)

The substantial value placed on relationships and treasured connections are now more meaningful and precious, eliciting increased affection and drawing families closer, with family time not to be taken for granted in the future.

I am thankful for the relationships that still exist, I won't take family and friends for granted anymore (P3). COVID brought me home and pulled my family into a closer-knit unit (P6). The appreciation shown towards you now means more and vice versa (P7). We enjoyed the quality time that we didn't have for a long time, I wish it could last and last ... (P1).

About socialization via the internet, participants noted:

Any emotional IQ went down the drain: you are only half ok ... because you see only the face and no body language, so spontaneous sharing is less, so I rather keep quiet and withdraw (P5). One on one is ok, but if there are many people on the screen, I turn off my camera, I feel lost, and even more isolated (P17).

On the other hand, there are new blessings, for instance, connectivity, which creates peace of mind for those far away, and for those that are close

Connectivity supported us to staying informed (P9). Connected to and socializing with inner and outer community, not excluding anybody, was good (P11). Children have the luxury of having parents at home, vice versa (P3). Working from home was brilliant, it shifted my routine to fit everyone, my child with problems could slow down and could solely build on his confidence (P13).

Forced adaptation of new skills leads to the discovery of new opportunities, income production, occupation, and transformation to routine.

I was thrown into very deep and very hot water, like a frog into hot soup ... working from home ... online ... but I now have new skills I am proud of (P7), COVID taught me that I want to pursue new avenues, that I was stuck where I was before COVID, I did not even realize it, I feel positive energy, because you also discover a way to help other people (P2).

Changed behaviours are deliberate choices that include being more in the moment and less on the surface. Initializing reasonable efforts to restore, preserve and enhance human connections toward robust kinship ties are evident in comments such as:

I am not keen to return to normal rushed routine... I wish it could last a bit longer (P3). We had fun and games, the children so much enjoyed picnics in our yard ... (P7). My husband "took" me for dinner ... in our yard- I dressed up, we walked around the house, pretending to drive, and he surprised me with a candlelight dinner he cooked himself; our restaurant was under a beautiful tree, he wore a suit and a bowtie ... that was so much fun ... (P9). A good sense of humor can pull you through (P11).

Altered views include:

I am done with superficial social media (P8). We must now plan to be together; I invite anybody I see; I create a celebration just to be around people (P15). No interaction felt like “a spiritual death sentence, I planned to socialize I now talk to anybody I see, some previous friendship bonds slacked off. I have good new friends because we are together in this hardship (P4).

Surprisingly, treasured connections stand above career and wealth, with less drive to change the profession or to have a strong work orientation:

The strive to climb the ladder of success isolates you from others (P7).

Findings reveal consciously planned selected activities, investment in worthy relationships, and evasion of individuals who drain energy.

Outer circle: community connections:

Individuals and their environment form an ecosystem with reciprocal relationships. These include the broader environment in which the individual acts, with all the mutual interrelationships between the individual and the various subsystems (Person/s-in-the-family’ or ‘Person/s-in-environment’ [19].

Meaning derives that serving in the surrounding community culminates in altruistic behaviours individually or in groups. Community, a civic entity, often represents a meaningful social concept of doing together [18,43]. Serving the community through cooperation and team support constructs new connections and closer relationships than before. Owing to the commonality of the Corona pandemic, experiences of loss of lives and income create solidarity and a greater understanding of the hardships of the less fortunate. Supporting outreach efforts shows deep-seated aspirations to serve those suffering with dignity. Serving diverts attention from troubles, reduces depression, and improves mental well-being.

I mourn for incomplete families, who lost someone, or their work, who are poor and alone, isolated . . . (P2). I will always remember the way people in our community reacted to requests for help (P4). When giving from nothing, it produces energy, battling through their own hardships, many have the resilience to still give and care about another’s well-being more than one’s own. Church has an important role to play in town; everybody knows about this church (P13). In future, the support shown will be remembered, and we’ll be able to feed on it (P14). One can serve by listening, stories of the elderly carried me, as 80% of the elderly were very positive (P6). Serving is an example of hope and resilience to children, paying it forward (P1). To reach out, combats depression, not reaching out, feeds depression (P10).

Through serving, thoughts, emotions, and behaviour interact more strongly. Qualitative evidence reveals resilience in the context of families and communities rather than financial security [23]. Transitional processes, with a strong before, in-between and after the interactive process, become visible through fostering meaningful relationships, which is more important than keeping previous traditions. Resilience is an interactive process that draws on personal characteristics and resources in relational and contextual spaces [26].

3.3. Appreciative Perspectives as a Process towards Adaptation and Positive Transformation

The ability to share and voice (co-constructing a new reality) was liberating; people were open and honest.

I am hoping that through my story it will encourage people to look at the bright side and take time to look at the beautiful moments we have every day (P12). It is bittersweet to talk: Breathing is a present, to be able to inhale . . . we need a disaster to relook life, to talk helps me to focus on new things (P4). Speaking about it helps me to accept the situation and do the right thing, I developed patience and less need for instant gratification (P9). I want to tell everybody: our eyes are on the wrong things—instead of worrying about investing in earthly wealth, status, and success, start seeing the people around you and appreciating them for what they are (P5). We lived fully; it may be the last time (P1).

Stop fabricating, faking, get real, it is meaningful to express what one has learned, I did not realize everything that I learned, it's good to get the thing out by verbalizing (P8).

Awareness, followed by a conscious choice to embrace the call for change, transpires into adaptive behaviour. The ensuing discussion reveals how resilience plays out, impacting the life journey.

4. Discussion

In the context of diverse middle-class community findings, central themes recur and are essential.

Besides dealing with unique explicit issues, people also experienced shock, uncertainty, extreme hardship, and often deep suffering. It was anticipated that individuals from a middle-class community would deliberately and continuously reflect on difficulties, verbalise some coping, show resistance to change, and be passive victims, with diverse individuals displaying diverse reactions to shock. However, participants referred to their hardships, but expressed conscious positive choices to embrace wicked circumstances. It does not, however, mean there is no pain.

Findings show that among psycho-social spheres, dynamic transitional processes interact and reveal strong before, in-between and after progression, culminating in and transpiring through changed behaviour. Procedures include reflection and transformational appreciation of life's value and meaning assigned to the past, present, and future.

Transitions to resilience, emotional strength, and agility emerge. Cognitive thoughts progress from worry, uncertainty, confusion, frustration, and anxiety towards the desire to experience growth, ultimately to achievement, gratitude, and a positive future vision. Emotional and spiritual processes move from fear, loneliness, and grief to acceptance, seeking the positive, taking a novel look at life's value, and finally, towards self-regulation, optimism, and finding inner potential. Behaviour progresses from fatigue, conflicts, and little capacity; towards coping, motivation, and ultimately, skills practice, using strengths in a new way.

The active practice of resilience embraces adversity, as demonstrated through conscious decision-making, emotional and spiritual agility, and novel validation of social relations in the family and the community. Actions culminate in serving, where class and race are not important, and recognition of weaknesses and inner strengths is displayed with pride. Furthermore, the same processes towards recovery and strengths appear across diverse individuals from the middle-class.

The theories of SBA, resilience, and AI towards positive transformation are interrelated. A methodology using appreciative positive strengths-based qualitative questions supports the active co-construction of solutions.

The value and strength of this qualitative study lie in showing how individuals interact with, adapt to, and attribute meaning to stressful situations such as Corona. Findings are essential because growth, although under pressure, is indicated among multiple domains. Life's value now centres on priorities in terms of what is most meaningful. Multidimensional connection between psychological and social aspects are consequences of a complex interaction between interpretations and meaning assigned to the past and what the past means to the present [8,12,44].

Essential to resilience is the acknowledgement of pervasiveness [23], such as permanency versus temporality, blaming versus taking control, and commitment after learning from mistakes [25]. The view of adversity and stress strongly affects endurance, coping, management, sustainment, thriving, social skill and tenacity, and 'bounce back' [23,27,45].

Demonstrating the active practice of resilience that embraces adversity are conscious choices and emotional and spiritual agility. Significantly, most welcome the "changed" situation or current state the communal disaster brought as a 'crossroad', a point of no return to a life lived as it was "before" Corona. Although resilience points towards 'bounce back' [45], here, the study shows that progression inhibits return to the previous state as

growth occurs. The individual believes themselves to be better off than before and is proud 'to be a better and stronger person'.

Recognition of weaknesses and inner strengths displays pride. Individuals navigate and unlock unique potential from pre-loss and lockdown performance levels. Awareness of weaknesses and visions of a new, emerging future with multiple strengths culminates in pride and the will to sustain, expand outcomes, and create new, innovative traditions.

Although this study only used a small sample and did not have quantitative results, the findings correlate with other studies that indicate resilience: according to BrandMapp [46], a testimony to the SA middle-class' stability and resourcefulness, "bruised by the pandemic but not broken", is that 75% were back in the workforce, and are increasingly working multiple jobs to make ends meet, as they can no longer rely on just their salary. According to BrandMapp [46], capabilities are a direct result of being privileged enough to be well-educated. Education is the boarding pass to travel middle-class-and-up, which is a benefit, as 6 million people are now responsible for more than 90% of all personal tax.

Changed dynamics due to the disaster include novel validation of social and relational connections in inner and outer circles. A variety of individuals bond into a sense of togetherness. The same processes towards recovery and strengths emerge across diverse individuals from the middle-class. Deeper, uniting, not-taken-for-granted, and less superficial relationships culminate into transformed appreciation and prioritising through consciously planned mindful encounters, where class is not essential. Through serving, the value of sharing and supporting creates meaningful relationships, communality, team support, and emotional identity.

Resilience necessitates sympathy and compassion to maintain healthy relationships. Positive outcomes correlate with literature: "Psychological resilience is an interactive and social process, triggering individual coping capacity through facilitative environments that make it possible to experience psychological well-being despite exposure to acute adversity" [26,47]. Understanding psycho-social interaction contributes to personally meaningful relationships that strengthen social bonds [11,20].

SBA, resilience, AI, and positive transformation are interrelated. Using a constructive change method (AI) with qualitative questions (through storytelling) supports understanding how a small, diverse middle-class group becomes resilient and how it co-constructs solutions, adapting in adverse circumstances. The interviewer supports construction with empathy so that participants do not feel judged [7]. AI combines strengths in the direction of awareness and building resilience towards transformations in stressful situations [11,12,22].

To summarize: The communal global Corona disaster created adversity and distress on multiple levels. The question was how psycho-social domains interact towards adaptation in stressful situations such as Corona in the context of a small, diverse community, not often reported on.

Qualitative thematic analysis responds to how strengths and behavioural changes emerge through psycho-social spheres interplaying, interactive transitional processes across social spheres, and the role of appreciative perspectives in adaptation. Interpreted inductively, meaning described in abstracted knowledge can be transferred to other contexts, for instance, building resilience in different sets of conditions in different groups that make up a society, basing interventions for recovery on real-world information.

5. Limitations

This study is a starting point and cannot generalize. Still, it suggests how to transform vulnerabilities into resilience, and suffering into flourishing, and how to achieve positive mental health in difficult times—how to prepare for an uncertain future.

The researcher acknowledges the complexities in reviewing reactions to unpredicted stressful events, especially those that could reveal changes in affect, cognitions, and behavioural patterns.

Critics warn against being too optimistic, producing only a partial image of reality. Resilience can suggest self-judgement; persons are stronger than they think. Perfectionism

can set expectations to be always resilient, forgetting that humans may need time to adjust to life's inevitable changes [46]. Crucial to resilience is a positive image of the future, with a desire to move forward to achieve goals [8,48]. However, using AI provides greater rigour and confidence in our conclusion.

Many gaps remain. One cannot only accept that communities can or cannot cope; more individuals need to be asked about their resources in a way that fosters appreciative resilience. Consequences are essential but understudied. Future studies should look at the larger middle-class and other socio-economic sample population groups, as well as gender groups; this study was over-representative of women. The focus needs to be on the youth, from all settings, as they are the largest asset of the future.

6. Conclusions

The sudden global pandemic forced people, without guidance, to leave their comfort zone, with nobody prepared for the psychological havoc caused by stress and fear about, amongst others, illness, isolation, and being forced apart and together. Corona has been psycho-socially strenuous for everybody in the world. It becomes essential to gain more knowledge on ways to achieve future positive mental health outcomes.

- This study used a qualitative approach to attempt to capture a deeper understanding of the complex human social phenomena—recently lived realities—of a small sample from a middle-class community not yet documented. Resilience and transition move from pre-existing problems, collective trauma, and distress towards the choice to grow, reframe, break free, and adapt. Although anticipating diverse responses, findings are similar across various groups from a middle-class community.
- This paper recommends a combination of methods:
 - AI with a narrative interview (for example, storytelling) to investigate subjective realities towards resilience and transformation, especially after adverse events. Their combination shows a theoretically, empirically, and ethically healthy approach to exploring how people adapt and can flourish in negative situations. Local people who recovered and received support during the crisis gained the opportunity to tell hopeful stories, thereby amplifying various positive images to carry into the future. AI supports creation by moving from desire to action, accepting the construction of reality as articulated by the interviewee. The moment the participant agrees to engage, using a narrative with a positive slant, they move away from being a victim. Retrospective narrative storytelling methodology combined with AI reveals future growth. AI points to the past and future but still requires direction to positive experiences, needing a period between the event and the interview [7], as in this study.
- The underlying theory of this qualitative paper—constructivism and positivism—indicates a social perspective regarding territories, including families and ‘communities in the environment’ on the micro/mezzo/macro level.
- The theory contributes to knowledge about relations, strengths, and resilience. The phenomenon is mental health, influenced by the pandemic.

Although Corona had a significant impact on every level, affecting and influencing everybody in the world, people from the middle-class readjust, primarily when navigation focuses on appreciation and awareness of strength. To have been ‘locked up,’ ‘unlocked’ new potential and innovation. Moreover, most regard the hazardous situation as a point of no return, never to embrace the life lived as it was ‘before’.

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