

## Can vulnerability and agency co-exist in the presence of violence? Perspectives among children and adolescents

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### Abstract

Children and adolescents in South Africa find themselves in contexts where experiences of and exposure to violence are prevalent. The experiences of violence often perpetuate feelings of vulnerability among adolescents. Vulnerability means exposure to more risks than peers, which is linked to diminished health and well-being. A plethora of understandings related to the complexities and richness of vulnerability exists within the body of knowledge. Kate Brown (2015) contours these complexities and richness of vulnerability across five subthemes/subtypes, namely, innate, situational, social disadvantage, universal, and risk vulnerability. Brown's understanding of situational vulnerability is used in this study to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents. The study included a sample of 16

adolescents who were purposefully sampled from two secondary schools in the Western Cape. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews that were guided by vignettes and were analysed using thematic analysis. The themes generated from the data tell the story that vulnerability and agency co-exist in the context of violence for adolescents. Agency is displayed in the capacity to make decisions in difficult situations. The decision-making styles displayed were consultative, evaluative, reflective, and considered decision making when faced with challenging circumstances. The findings extend current discussions around the experiences of vulnerability and agency among children and adolescents.

### Keywords

Adolescent, Agency, Decision-Making, Vulnerability, Violence

## Introduction

Agency, better defined as the ability of children and adolescents to make decisions or to act upon a situation, has often been viewed as the opposite of vulnerability (Zakayo et al. 2020). Vulnerability for children and adolescents means being exposed to risks more than their peers (Arora et al., 2015). These risks include exploitation, violence, neglect and abuse (Arora et al. 2015). It has often been thought that agency cannot exist in the presence of vulnerability. More recently, it has been thought that agency can arise through the experiences of vulnerability (Zakayo et al. 2020).

An exploration of childhood studies suggests that vulnerability and agency are distinct yet binary concepts (Andresen 2014). The binary view of vulnerability and agency suggests that children and adolescents can either experience vulnerability in situations or agency, but the two cannot co-exist simultaneously. Children and adolescents can be viewed as a vulnerable group due to their position in society and their dependence on parents and caregivers (Sultan & Andresen 2019). The perspective of children and adolescents as a vulnerable group, who often have limited abilities to engage in decision-making regarding their health and well-being, is evident when parents or caregivers make decisions that children and adolescents often need to adhere to. Children and adolescents are often in situations where they have little ability to make choices or engage in decision-making, which leads to the view of children as a vulnerable group within society.

Scholars posit that vulnerability is often viewed as detrimental to health and well-being – as it conjures images of helplessness, weakness, and victimhood. A plethora of understandings about the complexities and richness of vulnerability exists within the body of knowledge. Kate Brown (2015) has suggested one particular understanding of vulnerability. She contours the complexities and richness of vulnerability across five subthemes or subtypes, namely, innate, situational, social disadvantage, universal, and risk vulnerability (see Table 1). Another understanding of vulnerability by Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds (2014:7) considers it as being made up of different factors, namely inherent, situational, and pathogenic. One element

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(*Daily Maverick*, 2002).”

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which is clear in both the understandings of vulnerability by Brown (2015) and Mackenzie et al. (2014) is the role of situational vulnerability as that which describes transgressions, adverse experiences, or individuals who are in socially difficult situations (Mackenzie et al. 2014; Brown 2015). This includes homeless persons, refugees, women, and other socially marginalised groups, such as children and adolescents. Children and adolescents are viewed as a group experiencing situational vulnerability within the context of this paper. Children and adolescents may experience situations which put them at risk of diminished health and well-being. Some of these situational experiences, like poverty, structural violence, and inequality, within the South African context perpetuate vulnerability (Kim et al. 2023). As evidenced in recent statistics, more than 40 000 young people were victims of violent crimes like murder, attempted murder, sexual assault and grievous bodily harm during a one-year period in South Africa (Hoosen et al. 2022). In an article in the *Daily Maverick*, Meulenberg (2022) points out that “392 children in South Africa were killed in just 90 days in 2021, and another 394 survived attempted murder. [With] a further 2048 children [who] were victims of physical assault”. These statistics allude to the adverse violent conditions that children and adolescents in South Africa experience, and that are detrimental to their health and well-being and make them feel vulnerable. A recent systematic review has also highlighted how low socio-economic conditions, hegemonic masculinity and power contribute to violence among children and adolescents in South Africa, which perpetuates the situational vulnerability experienced (Hoosen et al. 2022). Situational vulnerability of children

and adolescents is further perpetuated through their dependence on authority figures like adults, teachers, parents and caregivers whose decision-

making may increase vulnerability to violence in homes and schools (Chetty, 2019).

Vulnerability subtheme/subtype	Definition
<b>Innate or natural</b>	“determined by physical and/or personal factors that are often associated with certain points of the life course such as childhood and older age” (2015:28).
<b>Situational</b>	“referring to biographical circumstances, situational difficulties or transgressions – this can include the input of a third party or structural force, and can also involve human agency (often to a contested extent)” (2015:28).
<b>Social disadvantages</b>	“vulnerability as related to social disadvantage, the environment and/or geographical spaces” (2015:28).
<b>Universal</b>	“where vulnerability is seen as a state shared by all citizens, but which is socially or politically constituted to varying extents” (2015:28).
<b>Risk</b>	“vulnerability as a concept closely related to risk” (2015:28).

**Table 1:** Brown’s (2015) understanding of vulnerability subthemes/subtypes

Yet the role of power, epistemologically, could inform the view that vulnerability and agency can co-exist for children and adolescents when experiencing violence. When children and adolescents experience situational violence, agency can emerge where there is a shift of power from parents and caregivers who often make decisions. Starhawk (1987) refers to this as ‘power-over’, where parents or caregivers make decisions for children and adolescents as there is a sense of ‘control over’ them. The shift in power, from ‘power-over’ to ‘power-with’, is when children and adolescents realise their capacity to make decisions and choices and engage with trusted individuals to help inform their decision-making process in situations. Starhawk has defined ‘power-with’ as a “sort of social power, the influence we wield among equals” (1987:9), which is where individuals have equal power and collectively arrive at an alternative or decision which depicts agency in situations that might make them feel vulnerable. Children and adolescents in South Africa are faced with many situations which make them feel vulnerable, and this study explored whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents.

## Methods

### Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency

among adolescents. The study is presented using the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ). A detailed description of the methods employed in the larger study has been reported in a previous paper (Davids et al. 2021). Below is an outline of the recruitment, participants, data collection procedures and analysis employed in the current study.

### Recruitment and Participants

All participants in the study were recruited from two public schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. An initial list of all public schools was generated and stratified on the basis of socioeconomic status where school fees were a proxy. Three schools in each of the strata (namely, no school fees, ZAR 1-1500 per annum, and above ZAR 1500 per annum) were randomly selected, and one school in each stratum was invited to partake in the study. A total of nine schools were invited to partake in the study but only two accepted. The remaining seven schools did not partake due to other active research studies at the school.

Sixteen participants formed part of the final sample from the two public schools. Participants at each of the schools were purposively selected to include an equal split between sex, socioeconomic status, and developmental phases. The developmental phases considered were early and late adolescence, using both age and educational level as an indicator.

All participants who were in the eighth grade in secondary school were categorised as being in the early adolescence phase, while those in the eleventh grade were categorised as being in late adolescence. The rationale for this purposive sampling was to determine whether differences in responses were found on the basis of these demographic descriptors. The procedures employed in the study started with an application for ethical clearance to the University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.

### Procedures

The study received ethical clearance from the University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Reference 301/2017) as well as gatekeeper permission from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) to access schools within the Western Cape, South Africa (WCED Reference 20170706-2719). Once permission was granted, the second author (ELD) made contact with the principals at the selected schools and set up an initial meeting with the principal and teaching staff to inform them about the study and to invite their school to partake in the study. Once the principal and teaching staff agreed to partake in the study, students were invited to participate in the study and were provided with a study information pack, which included an information sheet, parental consent, and student assent forms. Upon receipt of completed consent and assent forms, dates and times were agreed upon with the school that would have minimal disruption to the daily operations to collect data. Only the contact details of the researchers were shared with the participants, and no prior relationships were established with participants before the study commenced and data collection started.

### Data Generation

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted by two researchers. The interviews took place on the school premises, where the second author (ELD) conducted all interviews with English-speaking participants (n=10), while an independent second researcher conducted all interviews with isiXhosa-speaking participants (n=6). The second author is male, with an educational background in psychology and public health and his highest qualification is

a Ph.D. He was a post-doctoral research fellow at the time of the study with experience in adolescent health research. The independent researcher was a female who had an educational background in psychiatric nursing and holds a Ph.D. She was a senior psychiatric nurse at the time of the study. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the interviews ranged between 45 minutes to 1 hour in length. The participants were presented with vignettes that guided the interviews. The current study, however, only focused on whether vulnerability and agency co-existed in decision-making in the presence of violence. The vignette used in the current study involved characters who were exposed to situational vulnerability. Participants were asked how they experienced the vignettes and about their decision-making if they were the characters in the vignettes. The use of vignettes allowed participants to consider their hypothetical responses even if they had never experienced or engaged in the scenarios presented. To elicit responses from the vignettes, participants were asked about what they would do in the scenarios presented if they were characters in the vignettes. Throughout the interviews, both researchers kept brief notes and also held debriefing sessions after each interview to discuss the emerging thoughts, interpretations, codes or themes and insights that were generated (Braun & Clarke 2021). No repeat or additional interviews were conducted with the participants during the data analysis process.

### Data Analysis

All interviews conducted in English were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber and checked by the second author. The interviews conducted in isiXhosa were translated and transcribed into English by an independent bilingual transcriber and checked for accuracy by the isiXhosa-speaking interviewer. All transcribed interviews were analysed by both the first and second authors. The analysis involved manual coding informed by the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to conduct thematic analysis. The transcriptions were coded using inductive coding, where the code and themes were generated from the data guided by the process of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The codes and themes generated through the analyses by the first and second authors were compared and discussed, and an inter-coder reliability of 80% was

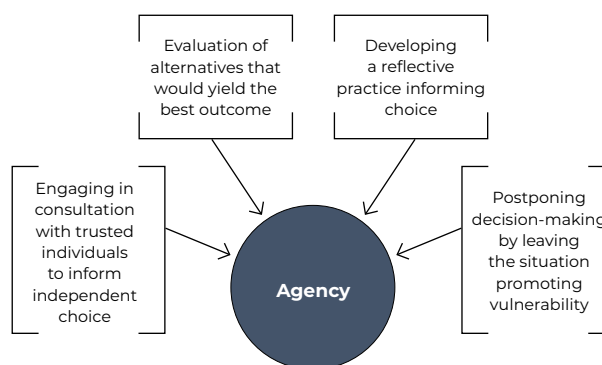
achieved. The final themes generated were not presented to participants for feedback.

### Scientific Rigour

The following strategies were employed to ensure the integrity and scientific rigour of the study: (i) Investigator triangulation was ensured to promote the credibility of the study's findings where the data and interpretations were generated by more than one researcher throughout the coding process (Lincoln & Cuba 1986). (ii) Trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability of the research study were achieved through the use of rich descriptions and transparency in the detailed steps taken in the study from conceptualization, development, and presentation of the findings (Korstjens & Moser 2017). (iii) Furthermore, reflexivity, the examining of one's own judgements, assumptions, belief systems and biases, was ensured through the frequent discussion and reflection on the interviews using both field notes and reflections in the study (Korstjens & Moser 2017).

### Results

The current study aimed to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents. The study provided the opportunity for adolescents to become co-creators of knowledge that facilitated agency in how they made sense of decision-making when confronted with situations in which they felt vulnerable and experienced diminished well-being, as seen in previous studies by Lamb, Humphreys, and Hegarty (2018) as well as Morris, Humphreys, and Hegarty (2020). Affording adolescents the opportunity to make sense of their decision-making in situations that heighten their vulnerabilities and diminish their perceived well-being allowed for agency and the shift from 'power-over' to 'power-with' trusted individuals. The themes generated from the data suggest that adolescents who were in vulnerable situations, in the context of violence, often made sense of their situations through decision-making that facilitated agency. The themes suggest that agency is evident in making decisions that are shaped by the following processes: (i) engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice, (ii) evaluation of alternatives that would yield the best outcome, (iii) developing a reflective practice informing choice, and (iv) postponing decision-making by leaving the situation promoting vulnerability (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** A diagrammatic representation of the themes which were generated from the data where adolescents displayed agency in their capacity to make decisions in situations where they felt vulnerable

#### Theme 1: Engaging in Consultation with Trusted Individuals to Inform Independent Choice

When adolescents are in particular situations in the context of violence, they are made vulnerable as their well-being is under threat. In these situations, where the presence of violence leads to feeling vulnerable, the data suggests that adolescents display their agency in their capacity to make decisions and display 'power-with' others, by including trusted individuals (such as teachers, parents or friends) to help them arrive at a choice or decision. By engaging in consultation with individuals whom they trusted to inform their decision-making and choice, there is a shift in power, where the situational vulnerability co-existed with the agency of engaging in shared decision-making with trusted individuals. The first theme, 'engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice', became a clear indication of 'power-with', where adolescents displayed an equal balance of power or agency in their decision-making process by consulting with a trusted individual to arrive at an alternative when faced with a vulnerable situation that diminished their well-being. This theme is evidenced through the following quotes when adolescents spoke about how they consulted with others to inform their decision-making power and displayed their agency:

'We make decisions... sometimes we ask our teachers if we are at school, what to do about something that we do not know, or ... our parents ask them what we do not know, and what to do. So if a child has to make a decision, you have to know this to keep our health in a safe place.' (Male, Age 14, Low SES)

'No, when I don't feel comfortable about it, I ask like, okay dad is this right or wrong? And he'll tell me, no it's fine, you feel like doing it, maybe it's the right thing, then I'll just go for it' (Female, Age 14, Low SES)

'Yes, I will go ask them for advice, what do they think, okay. Is this bad for me or good for me. And if they say, okay, it's good or bad, then okay, I'll keep in mind, okay. That girl said it's going to be good and that girl said it's going to be bad for me. And I just go back on me, is this going to be good or bad for me. I make my own decisions, I listen to my heart always and my guts. If my guts says it's bad or good, then I just go with my gut. And if my mind says, okay, you're making a stupid decision be the best person and go for the good, then I go for the good always.' (Female, Age 13, High SES)

It can be seen from the engagement with the adolescents that they start with a consultative process, particularly when they are unsure of what the available alternatives are for them. However, once the alternatives have been made available through consultation with those that they trust, they are able to make a decision on their own within the vulnerable situation which suggests their agency is displayed in their capacity to make a decision. The capacity to make decisions also involved an evaluative process which is suggested in the second theme.

### **Theme 2: Evaluation of Alternatives that Would Yield the Best Outcome**

For the adolescents who formed part of the study, it became clear that when they found themselves in situations that heightened vulnerability, such as in the context of violence, they often had the capacity to evaluate the alternative and outline the course of action that would yield the best outcome to promote their well-being. The capacity to act upon the vulnerable situation and to have the ability to evaluate the alternatives which would result

in the best outcome, sheds light on the ability of agency to emerge as a result of the situational vulnerability experienced by the adolescent. Below are three examples where the participants eloquently unpacked their capacity to take charge of the decisional situation and to exercise their decision-making power or agency to evaluate which alternative would yield the best outcome to nurture and develop their perceived well-being:

'When you want to make a decision you must first think about it, how does it help you, and what do you get from that decision you're making.' (Male, Age 14, Low SES)

'I usually think about how it will affect me, and my surroundings in the future, whether it's good or bad. Ja, that's pretty much it, ja.' (Female, Age 13, High SES)

'I think I have had like a thinking process. I'll always look at the negative things first, because I don't want negativity in my life, so I would try to avoid that, and always just follow the positive, yes.' (Female, Age 17, High SES)

Being faced with a situation that left the adolescent feeling vulnerable also afforded an opportunity to display agency in not only making a decision, but also evaluating which decision or alternative would yield the best outcome. The display of agency through the capacity to make a decision, not only involved an evaluative process but also a reflective practice, which is seen in the third theme of the study.

### **Theme 3: Developing a Reflective Practice Informing Choice**

The decision-making process that the adolescents engaged in was largely informed by a reflective practice. The reflective practice very often preceded the evaluation of the alternatives that they had. New insights often emerged from the reflective practice but it also allowed for learning about the situation that led to the vulnerable state and that impacted the well-being experienced. The reflective practice that fostered learning and facilitated agency was described by the adolescents in the following way:

'Ja. Because like, I have to think about like the decisions that I made before, what were their consequences, what happened, and how am I going to have to stop and avoid the things that

happened in the past, from happening now again. So I have to think about what happened in the past, and then find a way of doing it better and stop it from.. then stop the past from repeating itself.' (Female, Age 13, High SES)

'Regrets? It is important as a person, yes we all make mistakes but it is important to learn something from your mistakes. It is important to have a lesson learn from regrets to move forward. So I think having regrets play a huge role and it depends on the things that you regret, so it is important. Because at the end of the day there is no one perfect.' (Male, Age 18, Low SES)

The adolescents engaged in a reflective practice which informed their ability to make a decision. The reflective practice was shaped by past experiences. The display of agency in vulnerable situations also meant postponing decision-making, as suggested in the following theme.

#### **Theme 4: Postponing Decision-making by Leaving the Situation Promoting Vulnerability**

The previous three themes saw adolescents engage in active decision-making facilitated by their agency that emerged in the vulnerable situation. It also became evident that, for some adolescents, their experience of situational vulnerability meant that their decision-making power and agency involved postponing decision-making that did not involve consultation, evaluation, and reflection. Instead, they opted to leave the situation that precipitated the diminished well-being, which could be gathered from the remarks made by the participants:

'Okay. I would say I come from something like this, I was smoking from primary school but I realised that it is not something right that I was doing so I took a decision to leave the friends that were influencing me and leave the environment I used to stay in.' (Male, Age 15, Low SES)

'A decision that I had to make was to remove myself from him and not stay with him because sometimes he used to disturb me. I would be unable to study and I sometimes think that on specific he will come home and disturb me then I had to me from home to here and start a new school.' (Female, Age 18, Low SES)

## **Discussion**

Children and adolescents experience situations which put them at risk of diminished health and well-being. The situations which predispose adolescents to situational vulnerability in South Africa are perpetuated by poverty, inequality and structural violence (Kim et al. 2023). Experiencing violence in social contexts perpetuates vulnerable situations that result in children and adolescents experiencing diminished health and well-being, often linked to the lack of agency. Many have thought that agency cannot exist in the presence of vulnerability. The current study, however, aimed to examine whether vulnerability, in the context of violence, co-exists with agency among adolescents.

In situations where adolescents feel vulnerable, there is often a shift in power and agency, from 'power-over' (where decision-making power is displayed by parents and/or caregivers) to 'power-with' (where adolescents realise their capacity to make decisions in vulnerable situations). When the power is with the adolescent, they display agency through their decision-making. In this study, we have found that agency was exhibited through the realisation of their capacity to make decisions in four ways when faced with situations in which they feel vulnerable. The display of agency was seen in vulnerable situations through adolescents (i) engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice, (ii) evaluating alternatives that would yield the best outcome, (iii) developing a reflective practice informing choice, and (iv) postponing decision-making by leaving the situation promoting vulnerability.

Adolescents were found to display agency in contexts where violence made them feel vulnerable. The finding that vulnerability and agency co-exist suggests that the two concepts are not binary as initially outlined by Andresen (2014). Therefore, contexts in the presence of violence, which makes adolescents feel vulnerable, are examples of situational vulnerability. Mackenzie et al. (2014) outlines situational vulnerability as:

[situational vulnerability] by which we mean vulnerability that is context specific. This may be caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups. Situational vulnerability may

be short-term, intermittent, or enduring (2014:7).

The definition of situational vulnerability by Mackenzie et al. (2014) suggests, that the experiences of violence by adolescents in specific contexts might be experienced in overt and covert forms which exacerbates vulnerability that is influenced by multiple factors within the specific context. The time frame of situational vulnerability could be experienced as acute or chronic. Adolescents “who are vulnerable to harm or exploitation by virtue of the asymmetrical relations of dependency, power, and authority in which they stand to parents or other caregivers” (Mackenzie et al. 2014: 14) are in a space of situational vulnerability. It is within this ambivalent space of time and context that adolescents become aware of their capacity to make decisions. It is within the ability to make decisions that adolescents’ agency often transpires to counter-act the violence experienced within certain contexts. Agency is the response to the destructive and varied nature of violence experienced where the situation left the adolescent feeling vulnerable. It is through the awareness of the ability to make decisions, that the adolescent makes a shift in the power inherent in agency that disrupts the normative condition of ‘power-over’.

Agency and vulnerability, therefore, can co-exist. Furthermore, agency which stems from the autonomous self, which seeks a “self-determining life and the status of being recognized as an autonomous agent by others—is crucial for a flourishing life” (Mackenzie 2014:41). Vulnerability and autonomy (agency), for this reason, should not be viewed as opposites to seeking a “flourishing life” of health and well-being. Instead, there exists a relationship between agency and vulnerability. Mackenzie et al. (2014) have argued that, firstly, “to counter the sense of powerlessness and loss of agency that is often associated with vulnerability”, and secondly, “to counter the risks of objectionable paternalism” that vulnerability and agency, which has often been viewed as distinct, binary options can, in fact, co-exist. Situational vulnerability, therefore, becomes the condition in which adolescents become aware of their capacity to make decisions. The awareness of being capable of engaging in a decision-making processes becomes a tool to facilitate autonomy through agency as seen within the four themes of the study.

The data generated in the study, tell the story of how the context of violence can make adolescents feel vulnerable. The vulnerability experienced is situational vulnerability leads to a shift of power within the adolescent and brings awareness of the capacity to make a decision in a vulnerable situation, which further instills power and agency. The decision-making process that adolescents engage in, in situational vulnerability, fosters agency through engaging in consultation with trusted individuals to inform independent choice (theme 1), as well as evaluating the alternatives that would yield the best outcome (theme 2) in the decisional situations, but to also develop a reflective practice (theme 3) by accounting for past experiences in informing choice and being aware that delaying or postponing making a decision, and leaving the situation which has promoted the feelings of vulnerability (theme 4) is also an alternative choice.

The findings in the current study provide an initial reflection on how vulnerability and agency can co-exist in contexts where violence is present. The initial reflections on how adolescents engaged in decision-making as a form of agency when feeling vulnerable as suggested in the current study, could lead to the following recommendations for research and practice:

- Psychosocial programmes and interventions focusing on decision-making skills and capacity could inform decision-making styles and further promote agency when experiencing contexts or situations that lead to feelings of vulnerability.
- Interventions focusing on resilience-building and decisional strengths to counteract the implications of vulnerable situations on health and well-being can be developed, particularly for those situations where violence is present.
- Future research could also examine the implications of vulnerability and agency longitudinally to add to the gap in knowledge, but also to examine differences which might exist across various cultures and age groups.

Some of the limitations of the current study are the small sample size, and the sample being limited to one geographical location which creates an opportunity for future studies to include a larger, more diverse sample. Using vignettes as the only source to elicit responses related to vulnerability and agency is only one way of gathering experience.



It might be an opportunity for studies to consider data collection approaches that extend beyond vignettes only, and that includes more visual-based research methods such as body mapping and photovoice.

## Conclusion

Children and adolescents are exposed to situations where violence is prevalent. Contexts that make children and adolescents feel vulnerable have often been termed situational vulnerability. Vulnerability has implications on health and well-being, and is often viewed as a distinct yet binary alternative to agency. The results of the current study suggest that vulnerability and agency can co-exist in contexts where violence is present. Adolescents displayed agency through their decision-making process, which was generated from the data telling a story of decision-making being consultative, evaluative, and reflective, as well as having the choice to postpone making a decision when faced with situations that were deemed vulnerable.

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