

# Resilience in Cameroonian Children Living in the Context of Family Adversity

<sup>1</sup>Mengue Assila Marie Serge., <sup>2</sup>Ndje Ndje Mireille., <sup>3</sup>Ndadjé Fankam Zaviera Carmen

<sup>1</sup>Université de Yaoundé 1, Yaoundé Cameroun RAPHA-PSY, Yaoundé, Cameroun

<sup>2</sup>Université de Yaoundé 1, Yaoundé Cameroun

<sup>3</sup>RAPHA-PSY, Yaoundé, Cameroun

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## ABSTRACT

This study poses the problem of the nature of the mechanisms involved in the resilience of Cameroonian children living in a context of family adversity. Our hypothesis is: Cameroonian children living in a context of family adversity manage to get up and have a normal social life because of cultural signifiers. To verify this hypothesis, we used the clinical method. Our population had six children exposed to various forms of abuse, aged seven to twelve. As data collection tools, we used the semi-structured interview and the CYRM-28 questionnaire. Data were processed using the thematic analysis technique and computerized processing. The results obtained show that participants use different cultural signifiers to cope with the adversity they experience daily, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, that they are resilient. These cultural elements, thanks to their action in the process of symbolization, participate in the mentalization in these children.

**Keywords:** resilience; abuse; Cameroonian children; important cultural; protective factors; mentalization.

## INTRODUCTION

More children are experiencing situations of real adversity in their family environment (abuse, single parenthood, extreme poverty). These situations are more noticeable in developing countries, particularly in Africa (reference). In particular, a survey revealed that more than 91% of Cameroonian children were abused within their families (EMIDA-UNICEF, 2000, cited by Ezembe, 2013). However, these situations are traumatic for the latter (Mazoyer et al., 2016). Logically, the higher the risk, i.e. adversity, the lower the probability for such a child to have a favourable outcome in his or her confrontation with his or her family environment. Conversely, the lower the risk, the higher the probability (Solnit, 1978, 1982). A child placed in a context of intense family adversity would thus be expected to develop a disorder related to the trauma following the context. However, the empirical observation made is that many Cameroonian children placed in such conditions do not develop a disorder and, on the contrary, develop well, and continue to project themselves into the future. Indeed, curiously enough, they continue to lead a balanced life, that is to say that they manage to regulate their emotions, to adapt their behavior to the situations experienced, to identify their emotional states and to link them to the event that aroused them and to develop solutions, etc. The latter are then described as resilient. This observation raises the problem of the nature of the mechanisms leading to resilience in Cameroonian children living in a family context at risk. So, what are the so-called *resilience* factors that could allow the Cameroonian child, despite a context of intense family adversity in which he lives, to develop harmoniously, to create a place for himself in his family and in society, and to lead a "balanced" social life? To better approach this study, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of *family adversity* context and *resilience*.

## The context of family adversity or child abuse<sup>1</sup>

The context of family adversity can refer to several realities. In the context of this study, these will mainly be cases of child abuse. According to the WHO (1999), child maltreatment is defined as:

*All forms of physical and/or emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.*

Thus, there are five main types of abuse:

- **Physical violence:** refers to any deliberate use of physical force against a child that poses a threat to the child's health, development and/or self-respect (WHO, 2022). Along with sexual violence and neglect, these are the most visible forms of abuse and therefore the most encountered. A recent study found moderate physical violence such as spanking by an object in more than 92% of children in Cameroon, and more than 40% of victims of severe physical violence such as kicking (Naudin & al., 2023).
- **Sexual violence:** for the WHO (2002, p. 165), it is:

*Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, comment or advance of a sexual nature, or acts aimed at trafficking or otherwise directed against the sexuality of a person using coercion, committed by a person regardless of his or her relationship to the victim, in any context, including, but not limited to, the home and work.*

The phenomenon of intra-family sexual abuse is very real in Cameroon (Mbassa Menick et al., 2012). Because, according to Mbassa Menick et al. (2012), the abuser can be the father, the uncle, the cousin or the brother. His study even reports cases, albeit rare, of the abusive mother. Other treatments related to sexist or sexual abuse are also reported. Indeed, Pemunta (2016) reveals that about 12% of Cameroonian women have had their breasts ironed.

- **Emotional abuse:** refers to actions that cause or have the potential to cause adverse effects on a child's health and emotional development. The behaviour of the responsible adult can thus take various forms: rejecting the child, isolating him, ignoring him, terrorizing him, corrupting him or exploiting him (WHO, 2002).
- **Neglect:** This occurs when the adult responsible for the child does not meet the child's primary needs, whether physical, emotional, medical/dental, or educational. Neglect is also involved when the child does not have access to adequate nutrition, hygiene and shelter or when his or her safety is not ensured (Howard Dubowitz, 2019).
- **Intimate partner violence:** it is also a form of abuse because children who are exposed to it have similar problems to those who are directly victims of physical violence (Sadlier, 2015).

## Resilience: between factors of psychosocial adversity and protective factors

The notion of resilience, although recent, has an abundant literature. This situation can be explained in three ways: first, it is a notion that is transversal to different scientific fields (Theis, 2006). Second, even if the concept itself is recent, it describes a reality "as old as humanity," to use the words of Stefan Vanistendael (1994). Finally, its central place in any therapeutic process, the interest it has in it, are also likely to explain this situation. As a result, this reflection will not go back over the evolution of the concept of resilience (see Theis, 2006).

Faced with the inadequacies of the first models, the model of protective factors will emerge and will be considered synonymous with the notion of resilience itself. Studies have identified different levels of protective factors, including those internal to the individual, those related to his or her external environment and socio-environmental factors (Theis, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Here, the author does not indicate whether any figures or data are available with regard to the study population (Cameroonian children).

Very general definitions are given to illustrate the variables of the study, but are not related to the adversities that may be encountered by Cameroonian children, etc.

Clearly, the notion of resilience can be considered from several perspectives. In the context of this study, we will consider it from a psychosociological perspective, according to the model of Manciaux (2001). For him: *"Resilience is the ability of a person or a group to develop well, to continue to project itself into the future despite destabilizing events, difficult living conditions, and sometimes severe traumas"* (Manciaux, 2001, p. 322). This author thus emphasizes two points: harmonious development and projection into the future despite adversity.

At the same time, it is important to remember the importance of the social dimension in understanding resilience in children. The literature on the concept of *mentalization* in the child population is quite eloquent in this (Terradas, 2019; Allen, 2013; Fonagy, 2008; Fonagy & Target, 2007; Allen, 2001). These authors agree on the fact that the capacity for resilience includes the capacity for mentalization, which is necessary for the self-regulation of emotions and the good quality of interactions within one's social environment (Urfer et al., 2014). Thus, the child

Taking into account Moro's (2004) model of psychic elaboration, which considers that culture has a significant place in the psychic elaboration of the individual, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the model of *protective factors* relating to resilience, our research hypothesis is as follows: Cameroonian children living in a context of family adversity manage to get back on their feet and lead a "balanced" social life. thanks to cultural signifiers. In other words, they manage to develop the capacity for mentalization that allows them to elaborate suffering in connection with one's experience, just as they manage to forge family ties (parental and fraternal).

## METHOD

### Participants

The study looked at children of both sexes (four girls and two boys) with an age range between seven and twelve years. The common characteristic of these children is that they all lived in a context of real family adversity.

Table 1: Description of Participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Type of violence exposed	Grade level	Type of violence exposed	Ethnic group	Religion
Case 1	7 years	Daughter	Negligence	SIL	Negligence	Beti	Catholic
Case 2	9 years	Boy	Physical abuse	Not in school	Physical abuse	Beti	Catholic
Case 3	10 years	Boy	Negligence	CE1	Negligence	Beti	Catholic
Case 4	11 years old	Daughter	Sexual violence	Not in school	Sexual violence	Beti	Catholic
Case 5	12 years	Daughter	Verbal abuse	Fifth grade	Verbal abuse	Beti	Catholic
Case 6	12 years	Daughter	Sexual violence	CE1	Sexual violence	Beti	Catholic

This table summarizes the description of the children who participated in this study. It provides information on their age, gender, level of education, the type of violence to which they have been exposed and finally their resilience status.

### Study site and study period

This study was held in Mbalmayo, a small town in the Central Region of Cameroon, at the headquarters of the association *"The Good Samaritan"*. It is an association that welcomes orphans and abandoned children. It took place from October 21 to November 17, 2024.

### Data Collection Instruments

The study on the experiences of children in the context of family adversity was intended to verify the relevance of the hypothesis.... To do this, the tools that seemed appropriate to us are the semi-structured interview and the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28-(Jefferies & al., 2018)).

## Semi-structured interview

The choice to use the semi-structured interview as a research tool was made because of the dimension of the participants' experiences that interests us. It is a special technique that the researcher most often " *develops to meet the specific needs of his research in terms of information whose processing will lead to the objectives he has set himself* " (Aktouf, 1987, p. 81). This technique makes it possible to establish an exchange at the end of which the interlocutor expresses his perceptions of an event or his experiences.

Thus, the predetermined axes of this interview were the following: the type of violence to which the participant was exposed (physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, neglect); relationship with the parent(s) (support, abandonment, etc.); reaction of relatives (family, school, close circle); current psychological state (anxiety, depression, etc.).

## Measuring the Resilience of Children and Youth (CYRM-28)

This measure is based on the idea that:

*Resilience is defined as the ability of individuals to obtain the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources necessary for their well-being, as well as their individual and collective ability to provide and experience them in a culturally appropriate manner* (Ungar, 2008, p. 221).

The CYRM-28 makes it possible to assess the presence of socio-ecological components in the resilience processes of children and young people. It thus verifies individual assets, relational resources and contextual resources. The CYRM-28 consists of 28 items scored on a five-point Likert scale.

According to the total resilience score, children scoring between:

- 140 and 118 show a high level of resilience;
- 117 and 106 ... average level of resilience;
- 105 and 93 ... low level of resilience and
- 92 and 28 ... very low level of resilience.

## Procedure

After a pre-survey carried out with child victims of abuse by the association *Une vie*, the survey itself took place over a period of nearly a month, from October 21 to November 17, 2024. The interviews were conducted in the study room of the association *Le bon samaritain*, with an average duration of 35 minutes. We received two participants per day (mainly on Saturdays and Sundays). As for the CYRM-28 questionnaire, we left it to the participants who filled it out with the help of the association's instructors. They helped us translate certain items into the language of these children, and into the mother tongue, if necessary. They did so after a working session during which we explained the procedure to them.

## Data Analytics Strategies

The data from the interview were analysed using the thematic content analysis technique. It consists of identifying themes, sub-themes and categories of meaning from the analysis of materials. In our case, these materials consist of the various individual interviews conducted. As for the data from the CYRM-28 questionnaire, they were processed electronically, using Excel software, in accordance with the explanations included in the document from the Resilience Research Center group (2013).

Thematic content analysis. Content analysis consists of identifying themes, sub-themes and categories of meaning from the analysis of materials, in our case the individual interviews

## RESULTS

Table 2: Participant Results

Participant	Type of violence exposed	Level of resilience
Case 1	Negligence	High
Case 2	Physical abuse	Medium
Case 3	Negligence	High
Case 4	Sexual violence	Weak
Case 5	Verbal abuse	High
Case 6	Sexual violence	Medium

This table shows the resiliency status of each participant. This is mostly determined by their score in the CYRM-28.

The average resilience score is 108.33 (with a minimum of 95 and a maximum of 122). Overall, three cases have achieved a high level of resilience (case 1, case 5 and case 3); two have an average level of resilience (case 2: and case 6), only one participant showed a low level of resilience (case 4).

In addition, clinical interviews are marked by the constancy of cultural elements as protective factors for participants. In this regard, we note cultural signifiers such as belief in ancestors and the practice of traditional rites in cases 1 and 3, brother and sister moreover, orphans of father and mother. They are victims of neglect, both physical and emotional, on the part of their aunt. The first claims to have a protective ancestor whom she calls "*Nkálā*" (*protector in the Beti language*) with whom she communicates through the technique of a cry called "*ndán*". She confides:

*"... My grandmother used to tell us when I was a child that everyone has an Nkálā (protector in the Beti language). And every Nkálā has a ndán (cry) that he understands and through which you can call upon him... I call mine every time I am in danger and he always saves me."*

The second describes a rite of armor during the funeral of his late father. He states: *"... During my father's funeral rites, the large family had "prepared" me for my father's succession. During this ceremony, I received armor that made me invulnerable to any danger."* Cases 4 and 6 described, as a cultural signifier, belief in God. Case 4 claims to have Jesus as a true friend. She has confided to her aunt, who is also her guardian, her wish to become a nun. Case 6 is particularly pious. Since the incident exposing her uncle's abuse over a year-long period when she was 9 years old, she has devoted herself to the church's activities. She affirms that everything she asks of God is coming true. She confides:

*"My mother and her friends know that when I pray, it happens. One day, when my mother had asked me to pray for her friend who was sick all the time, and to whom the priest had revealed that it was her husband who had fetished on her, I began to pray for her. As a result, her husband died a few days later in a strange way, and she never got sick again, it's been more than a year. Everything I ask of God is coming true... ."*

Cases 2 and 5 are brother and sister, living with their uncle. They report sessions of "*Ndígí*" (clairvoyance in the Beti culture) and "*Mvàn*" (vaccination), initiated by their great-grandfather who is the chief of the village. And at the end of each holiday, before returning to the city to their uncle-guardian, their great-grandfather makes them undergo the "*Biwären*" (purification wash). The older sister (case 5) testifies:

*Tara (great-grandfather) always watches over us. I can walk in the night, auntie (their guardian's wife) can yell at me, I know nothing can happen to me. I know that my little brother is protected. Tara "prepared" us.*

These children do not live the same reality, of course, so they do not have the same experience either, but we observe the mmm processes in their elaborations. Indeed, they rely more on different elements of their own culture, which allow them to elaborate the suffering related to the mistreatment of which they are victims. Case 1 affirms that his ancestor-protector is with him everywhere, watching over him. This is why he declares: *"... I*



*am protected from everything, nothing serious can happen to me. I call my 'Ñkálā' whenever I am in danger and he always saves me."* Case 3, referring to the difficult times she spent with her brother, concludes in these terms: *"When one dances the Essánī (funeral dance reserved for successors and dignitaries in the Beti culture), one receives divine protection. I always think about it and it lifts me up, I know it will be fine."* Case 4 is convinced that her rape represents a difficulty testing her faith and says: *"Nothing can discourage me from becoming a nun, not even this ordeal."* Thanks to her belief in God, she manages to give meaning to the rape of which she has been a victim, just as she represents herself as having a sacred mission to accomplish. It is the same mechanism that is observed in case 6 who is convinced that he plays an important role for his family. Similar mechanisms are observed in other cases.

In addition, we observe children who are adapted to their environment, far from the picture to which they were predisposed, regarding their experiences. Thus, at school, they are children without any real delay, children with a capacity for mentalization that allows them not only to elaborate on the great family adversity they face, but also to maintain healthy interactions, a great capacity for emotional self-regulation allowing them to adapt their behavior to events, without much excess.

## DISCUSSION

These results are in line with the position of Moro (2004) who states that culture allows a coding of the entire experience lived by an individual, it makes it possible to anticipate the meaning of what may happen and therefore to control the violence of the unexpected, and consequently of nonsense. In the case at hand, cultural signifiers have indeed enabled our participants to elaborate the suffering relative to their experience by finding meaning in it, and they are also in line with the position of Devereux (1970), for whom *"culture is a standardized system of defenses and which, consequently, is in solidarity with the functions of the ego, since the ego defines itself, in large part, in psychoanalysis, by the mechanisms of defense"* (p. 46). And indeed, in the context of this research, it is observed that the participants first use cultural elements to alleviate the suffering induced by the violence of their experience. Culture would therefore play a very significant role in the psychic dynamics of a subject who faces intense adversities, such as children who are victims of mistreatment, violence, abuse.

In addition, these results are in line with the work of Kaës et al. (2005). Indeed, on the role of culture in the representational life of the subject, they note that:

*Culture is at this internal level, the set of symbolic representation devices that dispense meaning and identity, and as such organize the permanence of a human whole, the processes of transmission and transformation. It necessarily includes a device of self-representation, which implies the representation of what is not it, of what is foreign to it, or of what is attributed to it.*

Thus, these authors highlight the fact that culture provides a grid for reading and decoding social reality. The participants in this study thus manage, thanks to the cultural elements, to represent themselves as having an important mission to accomplish; and to imagine their adversity as a trial. Because, acquired, learned and then internalized, culture structures and determines the behavior of the individual. Linton (1977, p. 23) had already noted that *"culture as a whole provides the members of any society with an indispensable guide for all the circumstances of life"*. In this sense, it provides them with behavioural patterns of adaptation in relation to a particular environment (Di & Moro, 2008).

Moreover, these results are in line with Manciaux's resilience model. Thus, since resilience is understood here as *"the ability of a person or a group to develop well, to continue to project itself into the future despite destabilizing events, difficult living conditions, and sometimes severe trauma"* (Manciaux, 2001), the resilient child is therefore one who has been able to continue to develop "harmoniously" and continues to project himself into the future, despite exposure to proven abuse, as is the case with our participants.

## CONCLUSION

Moreover, this study has made it possible to understand the contribution of cultural signifiers in the resilience of children living in a context of family adversity. Culture therefore offers the individual, the child in this case,

tools to give meaning, to understand the stressful situations he or she experiences. And thus, he will achieve a more or less harmonious development, leading a balanced life in his family environment.

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