

Resiliency Among Inner-City Youths from Selected Areas of Ibadan City, Nigeria: Intervening Protective Factors in Response to Risk and Disadvantage

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KEY WORDS Resiliency; development; protective factors; family; environment; youths

ABSTRACT Resiliency is exhibited by many youths who are under very difficult situations in life while others suffer permanent developmental delays or disruptions. Two conditions which classify youths as resilient in this study include presence of a significant threat to the youth (such as loss of a parent through death) typically indexed by high risk status and successful adjustment to the high risk such that the youth turned out better than expected. This study attempted to identify protective factors considered important by 75 inner-city youths randomly drawn from Sapati, Oke-Are, Agbowo and Bodija market areas of Ibadan, Nigeria using autobiographical life-history approach to qualitative inquiry. Content analysis of the autobiographical interview was then carried out. The result of the study showed that individual attributes, supportive family environment and extra-familial individuals constitute the protective factors which intervene in the resiliency process of the youths despite the unfavourable circumstances which they have had to face in life.

INTRODUCTION

If we examine our parental goals it would not be an over-simplification to conclude that to realize these goals requires our children to possess the inner strength to deal competently and successfully day after day with the challenges and demands they encounter. This capacity to cope and feel competent is referred to as resilience. Resilience embraces the ability of a child to deal more effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversity and trauma to develop clear and realistic goals to solve problems, to relate comfortably to others and to treat oneself and others with respect. Numerous scientific studies of children facing adversity in their lives have supported the importance of resilience as a powerful insulating force. Resilience explains why some children overcome overwhelming obstacles, sometimes clawing and scraping their way to successful adulthood while others become victims of their early experiences and environments. Resilience has also been defined as a successful rebounding from stress or an overcoming of unfavourable odds in order to establish competent functioning Rutter (1987).

We are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social

competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Resilience research validates prior research and theory in human development that has clearly established the biological imperative for growth and development that exists in the human organism and that unfolds naturally in the presence of certain psychosocial and environmental characteristics such as social competence, problem –solving skills critical consciousness, autonomy and sense of purpose.

Social competence includes qualities such as responsiveness, especially the ability to elicit positive responses from others; flexibility, including the ability to move between different cultures; empathy; communication skills; and a sense of humor. *Problem-solving skills* encompass the ability to plan; to be resourceful in seeking help from others; and to think critically, creatively, and reflectively. In the development of a *critical consciousness*, a reflective awareness of the structures of oppression (be it from an alcoholic parent, an insensitive school, or a racist society) and creating strategies for overcoming them has been the key.

Autonomy is having a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one's environment, including a sense of task mastery, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy. The development of resistance (refusing to accept negative messages

about oneself) and of detachment (distancing oneself from dysfunction) serves as a powerful protector of autonomy. Lastly, resilience is manifested in having a *sense of purpose* and a belief in a bright future, including goal direction, educational aspirations, achievement motivation, persistence, hopefulness, optimism, and spiritual connectedness. The resilience concept implies a quantitative evaluation of functioning based substantially on normative expectations for adaptation, (Masten, 1994).

Some longitudinal studies, several of which follow individuals over the course of a lifespan, have consistently documented that between half and two-thirds of children growing up in families with mentally ill, alcoholic, abusive, or criminally involved parents or in poverty-stricken or war-torn communities do overcome the odds and turn a life trajectory of risk into one that manifests "resilience," the term used to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity. Furthermore, studies have shown that some children are not only able to cope with stress, they actually seem to be enhanced by it. On confronting stress later in life, they have learned from their experiences and seem better able to adapt to new challenges than are children who have experienced little or no stress. This has been called a 'steeling' or 'inoculation' effect (Rutter, 1987; Hetherington, 1991). Such a 'steeling' effect is most likely to occur when unresolved stresses have not accumulated over time, and when supportive or protective factors are available.

Protective factors are those that buffer the individual from the effects of stress and promote coping and good adjustment in the face of adversity. The important feature of protective factors is that it modifies the children's response to a risk situation. This modification requires some form of protection of the reaction to a factor that in ordinary circumstances leads to a maladaptive outcome (Rutter, 1987). These protective factors have often been given the credit for facilitating the process of positive adjustment to otherwise adverse circumstances of life. Three protective factors have frequently been identified. The first of these are positive individual attributes such as children who have easy temperaments, high self esteem, and an internal locus of control, are intelligent, independent, and in some cases, adaptable in the face of stressful life experiences

(Garnezy, 1983; Hetherington, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1990). Moreover, resilient children and youths have been found in the face of adverse conditions to have personal attributes which include religious faith, problem solving skills, optimism, a strong sense of purpose and future, absence of organic deficits, increased responsiveness, and look at things from alternative ways (Master, 1986; Seligman, 1990; Penick and Jepsen, 1992; Stipek, Recchia and McClintic, 1992). Nelson-LeGall and Jones (1991) identify help seeking as a problem-solving strategy that grows out of the cultural experience. Many practitioners view help-seeking behavior as an indication of dependence on the external environment to solve problems.

The second set of protective factors involves a supportive family environment. For example, the presence of one warm supportive parent can help buffer the adverse effects of poverty, divorce, family discord, and child abuse (Luther and Zigler, 1991). Rutter (1979) found that three-quarters of children troubled families who did not have a good relationship with one parent displayed conduct disorders compared to only one quarter of those who had a good relationship. This finding is in agreement with Feldman, Stiffman and Jong (1987) who stated that the social relationships among family members are by far the best predictors of behavioural outcomes in children. Other studies have also shown that rapport with a supportive adult, usually a parent or caregiver facilitated recovery from loss, stress and trauma, while affectionate bond to the non-alcoholic spouse in alcoholic family was found to be the most important variable in fostering adaptation. In summary, healthy child and youth development is often associated with support and affection from one or more adults as a buffer to the effect of risk.

The final set of protective factors involves extra familial individuals or societal agencies such as the school system, peer group, or church that supports the youth's coping efforts. Resilient children and youths have been found to utilize social support systems more effectively than their peers. These people form the external support systems acting like the supportive parent by forming relational bond with the resilient child or youth. For example, where a teacher becomes a source of support for a youth, his role no longer stops at teaching the child. The teacher also becomes a role model, a confidant and source of

inspiration for the resilient youth.

This study used qualitative method to identify these mechanisms and how these factors work to bring out resilience in children and youths. The qualitative evaluation of functioning is useful for explaining important discontinuities and fluctuations which often occur in lives over time and often frustrates quantitative aggregation strategies. Furthermore, predictive developmental studies have been criticized for not being able to explain these important discontinuities in life and for being overly concerned with a linear epigenetic ordering of the course of development (Cohler, 1987). Denzin (1994) therefore suggests that qualitative analysis of richly detailed narratives of personal experiences should be the overall task of research. The focus of this research is to further develop this aspect of research by focusing on those life experiences which radically alter and shape the meanings people give to themselves and their life projects. Through this, personal character becomes apparent. The researcher is able to identify the moments of crisis and coping strategies used by listening to the stories of people and recording these in detail. This study therefore aims specifically to examine how inner-city youths describe risk, resilience and protective processes in their lives and secondly to discuss the contributions made through individual attributes, supportive family environment and external support systems to their success stories and hence in shaping their developmental processes.

METHODOLOGY

The selected youths were among the most disadvantaged from the areas where they have been selected. They grew up in neighbourhoods and attended elementary primary schools in which an average of 70% of the families is poor. Typically, a family of seven resides in one-room apartment in these areas. The demographic variables of the participants are as shown in table 1.

The age of the participants ranged from 16-22 years with mean age as 18.59. Of the youths sampled, 2.7% had only primary education but are successful in their vocations; 80% with secondary education while 17.3% reported being in the tertiary institution (still in school). 20% of them live with their parents while 80% live with relatives or guardian. Mother alone raised 40%

Table1: Demographic distribution of study participants

S. No.	Variable	Frequency	%
1. Family Structure:			
	Living with parents	15	20
	Living with relatives/guardian	60	80
	Raised by mother alone	30	40
	Raised by father alone	6	8
	Raised by both parents	15	20
	Raised by relatives	24	32
2. Educational Level of Participants			
	Primary	2	2.7
	Secondary	60	80
	Tertiary	13	17.3
3. Parental Educational Levels			
	Primary	50	66.7
	Secondary	25	33.3
4. Occupation of Parents			
	Junior worker (civil servant)	24	32
	Petty trader	15	20
	Unemployed	30	40
	Retired	6	8%

of the participants, while 8% were raised by fathers alone. 20% were raised by both parents while 32% were raised by relatives. For the occupations of parents, 32% are junior workers in the civil service, 20% are petty traders, and 40% are unemployed while 8% are retired elderly. *Instruments:* Interview method was used for this study. Each interview was structured in form of autobiography of the participants based on the autobiographical life-history approach to qualitative inquiry (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Main, 1991)

Procedure: A screening device designed by the researcher was used to identify youths at risk such as those from broken homes, those who have lost one parent through death, those whose homes are intact but one parent is unemployed. The instrument also tapped information about the present occupational status of the respondents. 75 of such youths identified to be at risk but who are currently doing well were randomly selected for the study. The researcher used the interview format form of autobiographical life-history approach to qualitative enquiry for collecting the relevant information from the participants.

Each interview lasted for fifteen minutes. The interview questions include:

Imagine that you are watching a movie about your life

1. What are some of the events you would want to see in the picture?
2. What are the important things in your life that

- the movie will describe?
3. What will the movie tell us about how you got to where you are today and what lies ahead of you in future?
 4. What information will the movie give concerning your parents, friends and what they mean to you?
 5. The movie might also present some of your ideas about people or life. What are these ideas?

You can now write the story of your life briefly on this sheet of paper.

Those youths who could not write very well were assisted by research assistants who were instructed to write down verbatim whatever the participant says without any alteration or correction in order to maintain the participant's self-expression. They were also provided with privacy. The essays were then analyzed from resilience perspective. The essays are categorized into positive individual attributes, supportive family environments and extra-familial support systems or societal agencies.

Analysis: Content analysis of the biographical essays was used as the major method of analysis in this study. This enables the researcher to consider resilience from a qualitative perspective.

RESULTS

The findings show that the resilient youths experienced the same high level of risk but had better outcomes. The protective factors which facilitate the process of adaptation are now considered as revealed in the autobiographies of the youths.

Stories Showing Individual Attributes of the Youths

One of the youths wrote:

I would want the movies to show a girl who lost her father, at the age of eight years, how life and situation went bad financially for her mother and she had to go and stay with an uncle. How the uncle never paid her school fees on time and how she was always sent home as a perpetual school fees defaulter. The movie should also show how she had to stay on her own from the first year in the secondary school to the final year in a house in town where nobody really cared for her but want to seize any opportunity to send her on one errand or the other. How at a time, the mat on which she was sleeping became so torn that part of her body

touched the bare floor whenever she slept. I would want the movie to show all the financial problems, the agony and the temptations she passed through in college. The movie should show how, these troubles and difficulties turned to be catalyst that brought the best out of her. Despite all these problems not only did this girl never failed once in college, she was among the best ten students in every class through out her study. This was achieved through perseverance and hard work. Bad situations in life have a way of bringing the best out of some people rather than bringing them down.

Another participant said the following about his life :

The movie will show the story of someone who started so poorly in life that but finally got to a position of honour and respect among peers .Time is one thing that every one whether old or young, rich or poor has in common. Everyone has the same twenty-four hours in a day all over the world. My father has been out of job for the past three years and things have been rather difficult in the family. My mother's income from her petty trade could not cope with feeding the family not to talk of school fees of six of us in different schools. When I was still attending school I also spent some time daily to learn a trade. I did not want to be like my other friends who spent their time in watching films. When it was apparent that I will not be able to continue with my education due to lack of money, I continued with the trade I had learnt. My trade is doing well and I am better than some of my mates in our neighbourhood. I have told myself many times that I just have to make it in life.

Another participant :

My parents were always at logger heads as far as I can remember until one day when my father threatened to cut my mother's head with a cutlass which he brought out from the store . I saw my mother packing her things out of the house and she never came back till today. We never had enough money so they were always quarrelling over money matters .I made up my mind that I was going to work hard to make enough money in my life.

A boy shared this experience:

The movie of my life will of someone who was always failing in school from the junior class to the penultimate year in the college when suddenly through a never-give up way, persistence, perseverance and hard work , I

finally started passing my exams and I passed all my courses in the college at credit level which qualified me to take a course of study in the higher institution today.

Another male respondent reported how by not listening to correction and instruction has led to a friend's dropping out of school joining bad gangs and eventually was sentenced to a prison which he is still serving presently. *"This need not happen to me if I listen to correction and work hard though things are rather difficult as at now"*. He stated. He is the current senior prefect in his school.

A 22 year old undergraduate wrote;

I have had to cut and sell firewood, do odd jobs for people to enable me remain in college. I have finally made my way to university. My mother's income has never been sufficient to take care of us since our father died five years ago.

The summary of findings from these autobiographical stories show a mixture of realistic appraisal of one's abilities, having a determination to succeed in life, resisting peer pressure by avoiding initial excitement and subsequent danger inherent in risk-taking situations and circumstances of life, believing in one's abilities to make it in life despite all odds, high-self efficacy, persistence, perseverance and believe in hard work has served as protective factor inherent within the resilient youths from falling into the same mistakes made by others.

Supportive Family Environment

Some resilient youths in this study attribute their success to parental support received, motivational support, guidance and mentoring enjoyed from relations such as uncles, aunts and sibling-sibling interaction despite environmental risks. Such examples are listed as follows;

A twenty-five year old lady wrote about her initial problems and her success story:

I was raised by my mother only. We are family of eight. I lost my father through an accident in which he died when I was in Primary Three. Since then, my mother and her senior brother had been taking care of us. Despite this, things were rather difficult. But above all, I found rest, assurance, help, confidence and joy in God. My relationship with God has been the anchor that held my life together. And now, despite all the difficult times we faced, I have been able to complete my

education at the tertiary level. Indeed, God has always been there for me to help me through someone whenever it seems as if the problems will swallow me up. Also, I and my other siblings have come to love one another and to help whenever the need arises.

Another 21 year old trader said;

My elder brother introduced me to the business I am doing. Today, I take care of myself out of the profit that I am making. My brother encouraged me to work hard and to live well. I left schooling at Primary (6) six because my father does not care about sending girls to school. My mother supports her husband in this and does not even have money of her own. Some of my friends whose fathers did not send to school became mothers by 16 years old and are suffering now.

A twenty-two year old trader also attributed her success to his step-brother. He said:

When I finished secondary school and was at the village doing nothing, my step-brother invited me to Ibadan to be managing one of his businesses from where I earn a living today.

A female undergraduate wrote,

I would like the movie to show how my mother was always there to encourage me to be hard-working and that all will be well if only I can work hard and do the right thing. How she was there to guide me against making mistakes like some of my friends made. She actually never had enough money but she was very caring and encouraging. Her marriage did not work out well, but she was not shattered, when my father left her with four kids. She kept on doing her best. She taught me how to say "please", "sorry", and "thank you" for the appropriate situations.

My mother and brother helped me up when I was at the bottom of the ladder. When I was expelled from school, they gave me the utmost support, assured me that that is not the end of life for me. But that I should learn from my past mistakes and try doing right. They got another school admission for me and my life changed. Altogether I never followed bad boys again and was always attentive in class. Now, I am waiting for admission into higher institution as I have already passed at credit and distinction levels all my o/levels subjects.

My grandmother took very good care of me. She would always say "your success is in your hands" "Lazy people never make it" "Never accept

defeat or failure no matter what the situations may be. These kept me on the path of success

My uncle was everything I wanted after the death of my father. He introduced me to the business I am doing presently and was always encouraging me to be hard working and honest. He communicated with me and made it easy to talk to him at any time I have problems.

From the content of analysis of the essays written by the participants, the following summary could be drawn, all of them expressed high satisfaction with the social support received from family members when they were experiencing hard times. The support they received from these family members attracted praise from the youths, as it forms the basis of their success story despite the prevailing hard and stressful times. The youths also were able to learn from the mistakes they see others make and were determined not to follow the footsteps of their peers who did not succeed. In the face of economic pressures and disadvantage peer group pressures, risky environment the youths have been motivated to keep their heads and focus on the future, working hard to attain success.

External Forces

The external sources of support for the participants came from friends and religion. A twenty year old lady wrote about her initial problems and her success story; I was raised by my mother only. We are a family of eight. I lost my father through an accident in which he died when I was in primary one. Since then, my mother has been struggling. Despite these difficulties, I found rest, assurance, help, confidence and joy in God. She taught me to always pray to God. My relationship with God has been the anchor that held my life together. And now, despite the all the difficult trials we faced, I have been able to complete my education at the tertiary level. Indeed God has always been there for me to help me through.

Another successful banker wrote:

My father, a junior worker in an establishment was an alcoholic, ever so difficult as a father and husband. He never left much out of his earnings for the family upkeep, but spent most on drinks. His health started to suffer and was after sick. As a family of nine, my mother had to carry the bulk of the burden and work hard on everything she could lay her hands on for legitimate money. She was so much a source of

inspiration to me, was ever so open and did all she could to make us happy. I had to work hard in order not to let her down. I finished secondary and did not do well, but through her persuasion I put in for the examination again and passed. I also gained admission into the university that same year. Unfortunately, my mother died while she was trying to obtain a university degree. She slumped and died. My father who could not cope with the responsibility of seven children died exactly a year later. The seven of us were thrown into darkness of life suddenly. Support from our church and friends, which enabled me to complete my university education. After the National Youth Service year, I just visited a friend in his house and he presented my case to his father. I was offered an appointment by a bank through this friend. I am now able to support my other siblings to complete their education. My friend really proved to be reliable in my moments of stress and sorrow. He was always there to cheer me up and boost my morale.

From the above, these youths have been able to attain success in life through the help they received from their friends and through religious committed associates.

DISCUSSION

This study examined resilience in a sample of disadvantaged youths in some areas of Ibadan. The researcher attempted to look into the intervening protective factors such as individual internal attribution, supportive family environment and extra-familial (external) factors, by using their autobiographies. Resilience was taken to be present where living in conditions of risk, stress and strain, show better than otherwise predicted outcome due to some intervening process (Masten and Coatworth, 1998; Rutter, 1987).

From the content analysis of the youths' autobiographies, Werner (1989), this study found that the individual attributes of the resilient youths include, having a determination to succeed in life, resisting peer pressure so as not to fall into mistakes others have made, believing in one's ability to achieve one's aim in life notwithstanding the problems, persistence and perseverance and believe in working hard. With these qualities the resilient youth were able to resist succumbing to risk processes. Their stress, strain and difficult times have really helped them to move from maladaptive to adaptive in agreement with Denzin (1994).

The resilient youths also reported motivational and emotional support from their family members such as; mothers, brothers, uncles, other siblings and significant others. This finding confirms findings of Yoshikawa, (1994); Rutter, (1987), that regular communication of parental warmth, affection and presentation of clear, social expectations can inhibit conduct problems in children. Moreover, the youths in this study acknowledged the support received from external sources such as from church members their religious belief and close friends. This confirms the findings of Nelson-LeGall and Jones (1991) that help seeking is a problem-solving strategy that grows out of the cultural experience. Help-seeking behaviours have been viewed by many practitioners as an indication of dependence on the external environment to solve problems.

This study has implications for parents, guardians and counselors in handling youths that are exposed to risk conditions. Important factors that have been consistently mentioned by the resilient youths in this study are protective monitoring and motivational support received from adult relationship. This has implication for the quality parent-child relationships as perceived by the youths. Resilience should be viewed as something we foster throughout students' development by strengthening protective processes for students at critical moments in their lives. When resilience is viewed as a developmental process that can be fostered, then strategies for change can be directed toward practices, policies, and attitudes among practitioners. It is important to realize, however, that even when practices, policies, and attitudes are changed within schools and communities, the work is not done. The environment will not automatically end up full of resilient children. Within every young person is a delicate balance during those critical life events between the protective processes and risk factors that originate both internally and externally. Protective processes have to be reinforced constantly so that the potential for young people to be resilient when faced with risk factors and vulnerabilities remains intact. Adequate and current information are necessary to keep youths at risk on track and to learn from the mistakes of others who may not have listened and have fallen into error. However, more research will be needed, both qualitative and quantitative to establish the exact causal pathways to resiliency development in children.

This research is limited in these areas.

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