

**Protective Experiences that Foster Resiliency Among Nigerian Young Adults**

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### **Abstract**

Children exposed to adverse experiences, such as violence and neglect, are at higher risk for negative outcomes in adulthood, including physical and mental health challenges and inhibited brain functioning (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005). However, many individuals with adverse childhoods demonstrate resiliency, which means overcoming hardship to thrive in adulthood. Certain protective experiences predict resiliency, but types of protective experiences likely differ between cultures. This study examined environmental protective factors that predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults. The sample consisted of 89 tertiary students. Resiliency was measured by the Connor-Davidson Resiliency Scale. Protective factors were drawn from a culturally-modified version of PACES (Protective and Compensatory Experiences) Questionnaire, supplemented with additional protective experiences in Nigeria that were identified via pilot study interviews. Results identified protective experiences that predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults as a safe home and community, physical activity, positive social relationships, participation in spiritual activities, and opportunities to pursue activities of interest. These factors significantly predicted resilience, accounting for 35.72% of the variance ( $R^2$ ). This study provides a foundation for future research in this area and valuable information for community interventions to foster resiliency for Nigerian children living in challenging situations.

## **Introduction**

In 2003, Nigeria signed into law the Child Rights Act (CRA). This act criminalizes all forms of abuses and violence against children. However, after 13 years, only the Federal Capital Territory and 4 other states have completed mappings and assessments of their child protection systems (UNICEF, 2014). This may explain why acts of violence and abuse against minors are still prevalent in the Nigerian society. Apart from the violation of the rights of the child, issues of political, religious, and ethnic violence; poverty; child labor; child trafficking; high mortality rates; and diseases, among many others have resulted in difficult childhood years for many Nigerian children.

The numerous adverse experiences that children in Nigeria suffer while growing up can be narrowed down into three major areas: child abuse, neglect, and communal violence. Child abuse is any form of physical, emotional or sexual mistreatment of children. It could, perhaps, be considered as the primary adverse experience that children in Nigeria face considering its multifaceted nature. Second, neglect constitutes the failure by a parent or caregiver to properly provide the physical or physiological necessities for a child's life (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2016). Neglect is a prevalent phenomenon in the Nigerian society (Olawale & Adeniyi, 2011). Neglect ranges from failure to provide adequate food and shelter to not meeting a child's needs for love and concern. Finally, communal violence is prevalent in Nigeria. For example, in 2014, the armed conflict in northeastern Nigeria saw a spike in violence, including the displacement of more than 800,000 children and the mass abduction by Boko Haram of 276 school girls from Chibok, as well as numerous other abductions and attacks on schools.

Child abuse, neglect, and communal violence, as well as other stressful events, can result in toxic stress, which is the strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of physiological stress (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005). Research has provided

evidence that toxic stress can adversely impact the brain's architecture, resulting in a smaller brain. It can also lead to physical and mental illness as well as behavioral disorders throughout the child's lifetime. The number of adverse experiences that a child is exposed to increases risk for substance abuse, memory problems, aggression, mental health disturbances, and sexual promiscuity (Anda et al., 2006).

Though toxic stress can adversely impact a child both biologically and psychologically, some children demonstrate a remarkable ability to thrive amid adverse experiences. These children demonstrate resilience, which constitutes the conceptual framework for this study. Resilience is defined as achieving a positive outcome in the face of adversity (McEwen & Nasca, 2015). Children and young adults who demonstrate resilience are able to recover the adverse experiences they suffer in childhood and demonstrate recovery, growth, and even engagement and participation in prosocial behaviors (Taylor, 2016).

Because children and youth who demonstrate resilience do not demonstrate the negative outcomes of toxic stress, it is important to identify factors that foster resilience amongst children and youth. Morris, Hays-Grudo, Treat, Zapata Roblyer, and Staton (2014) identified 10 protective factors that foster resilience amongst American children who have been exposed to toxic stress. These ten factors include unconditional love of a caregiver, presence of a trusted non-parent adult who offers help, at least one best friend, regular opportunities to help others, involvement in physical activity, membership in an extracurricular youth group, an engaging hobby, a safe home, a good school, and fair administration of rules in the home. However, culture may influence factors that foster resilience (Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008). Therefore, more research is needed to identify protective factors that foster resilience in Nigeria.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine environmental protective factors that predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults. Specific objectives of the study include the following.

- To identify the level of resilience demonstrated by Nigerian young adults.
- To identify protective factors that predict resilience among Nigerian young adults.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The following two research questions were answered in the study.

- What is the level of resiliency demonstrated by Nigerian young adults?
- What protective factors predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults?

The second research question can also be framed as the following alternative hypothesis.

- There are protective factors that significantly predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 89 tertiary students, 60 of whom were enrolled in the first semester of a 2 year diploma program and 29 were enrolled in the second semester of a 4 year degree program. A majority of the sample was male (49 male, 34 female, and 6 missing). The average age of participants was 22.83 years.

#### **Instruments**

*Resiliency.* Resiliency was measured by the Connor-Davidson Resiliency Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson, 2003). The shortened 10-item CD-RISC (see Scali, Gandubert, Ritchie, Soulier, Ancelin, & Chaudieu, 2012) was used in this study to measure resilience, defined as the ability to cope with stress and thrive in the face of adversity. Participants were asked to describe how often they had felt in the past one month and responded on a five-point

scale from 0 not at all to 4 all the time. Higher scores on this scale reflect greater resilience. A sample resilience item is “I am able to adapt when changes occur.” Davidson and Connor (2015) provided evidence of construct validity of this instrument whereby individuals who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies had significantly less resiliency than others. Davidson and Connor also provided evidence of convergent validity with other similar measures of resilience. The internal consistency (coefficient alpha) of the CD-RISC-10 in this study was 0.800.

*Protective Factors.* Protective factors were drawn from a culturally-modified version of PACES (Protective and Compensatory Experiences) Questionnaire. Interviews identified additional protective experiences in Nigeria that supplemented the PACES Questionnaire. A total of 31 items were developed as potential protective experiences. Participants were asked to indicate whether they had experienced any of the items when they were growing up before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday by circling either yes or no.

### **Procedure for Data Collection**

Participants were given the questionnaires to complete during their lecture. Instructions were given as to how to complete the questionnaires. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaires and submit them to the course lecturer after class.

### **Results**

The first research question asked, what is the level of resiliency demonstrated by Nigerian young adults. In this study, the mean score of resilience was 27.01 (scale ranging from 0-40) and the standard deviation was 6.83. Davidson and Connor (2015) reported the mean scores on the CD-RISC-10 across research studies that administered the instrument to individuals with PTSD and/or individuals exposed to severe trauma. The participants in this study had lower resilience than Americans with PTSD and/or exposed to trauma (Mean=28.5, SD=5.5), but higher resilience than former child soldiers in Uganda (Mean=22.7, SD=8.3)

and slightly higher resilience than Chinese university students with PTSD (Mean=25.5, SD=4.9).

The second research question asked, what protective factors predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults. The potential protective factors had an average agreement of 65.82%. In other words, an average of 66% of the participants reported that they did experience each of the 31 potential protective factors. The most common potential protective factor was “In your home, were there rules that protected you and helped you learn good behavior” with 91.01% of the participants experiencing this factor. The least commonly endorsed potential protective factor was “Did you have a neighbor you trusted and could count on when you needed help or advice” with only 32.58% of the participants experiencing this factor.

To determine which factors best contributed to resiliency, a backward stepwise regression analysis was conducted. In backward stepwise regression, all of the predictor variables are entered into a regression equation. Then, the variable that has the smallest squared partial correlation with the dependent variable is removed. This process is repeated until a small set of variables remain that have a significant proportion of variance accounted for with the dependent variable (Haye, 1994). In this study, all 31 protective factors were first entered as predictor variables into the backward stepwise regression model, with resilience as the dependent variable. Then the protective factor with the smallest squared partial correlation with resilience was removed. Then the next protective factor with the smallest squared partial correlation with resilience was removed. This continued until only ten factors remained that predicted resilience.

The ten protective factors significantly predicted resilience ( $F(10, 68)=3.68, p<.001$ ). The alternative hypothesis that there are protective factors that significantly predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults was therefore accepted. These ten protective factors predicted

35.72% of the variance ( $R^2$ ) of resilience. See Table 1 for each of the protective factors that predicted resilience, in order from the most predictive to the least predictive.

Table 1. Protective Factors that Predict Resilience

Protective Factor	Correlation with Resilience
Home and community were typically safe	.673
Family often spent time together	-.379
Frequently engaged in an artistic or intellectual hobby either alone or with a group of friends	-.348
Regular attendant of extra religious programs and services	.308
Someone loved you unconditionally	.282
Regularly involved in necessary physical activity	.262
Rules were fairly administered in the home	-.228
Had at least one best friend	.207
Schools were good to enable you to learn	-.103
Parents/guardians encouraged to pursue activities and endeavors of interest	.091

The protective factor that had the strongest relationship with resiliency was that the home and community were typically safe. Of the ten protective factors that predicted resiliency, four had negative correlations. This is the opposite of what would be expected of a protective factor as this means that individuals who did not experience this factor had higher resiliency than those who did experience the factor.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine environmental protective factors that predict resiliency among Nigerian young adults. The study identified ten factors that predicted resiliency among Nigerian youth. The protective factor that predicted resiliency most strongly was a home and community that was typically safe. Other protective factors that predicted resiliency include physical activity, positive social relationships, participation in spiritual activities, and opportunities to pursue activities of interest. It is interesting that positive experiences in multiple domains, including social, spiritual, physical, and cognitive, all predicted resiliency.

However, there were some unexpected results in the study. Four factors that were expected to predict resiliency had a negative correlation with resiliency, indicating that participants who indicated that they did not experience the factor had higher resiliency than those who indicated that they did experience the factor. The four factors include a good school, fair administration of rules in the home, family spending time together, and intellectual hobbies. This is the opposite of what was to be expected, which indicates the need for further research to replicate this study to confirm the validity of these findings.

This was an exploratory study into protective experiences that foster resiliency among Nigerian youths and, as such, the results should be taken with caution until future research can replicate the findings. There were a number of limitations to the study. First, a sample size of 89 is small, particularly for a regression analysis. Future research should replicate this study with a larger sample size. Second, the psychological construct of resilience may be demonstrated differently in the Nigerian context than in other contexts. Indeed, Aisenberg and Herrenkohl (2008) propose that the current definition of resilience focuses on an individual's ability to overcome adverse experiences, whereas collectivist cultures may view resilience differently. Additional research should be conducted to examine how resilience is manifested in the Nigerian context. Likewise, the instrument that was used to measure

resiliency has not yet been researched to collect reliability and validity evidence in Nigeria, though there have been validation studies among populations in South Africa and Uganda.

### **Conclusion**

Young people in Nigeria today face many challenges as they grow up, including physical abuse, neglect, and communal violence. Therefore, resiliency, defined as achieving a positive outcome in the face of adversity, is an important construct to enable youth to thrive in the face of these challenges. This study identified ten protective factors in childhood that predict resiliency in young adulthood, including a safe home and community, physical activity, positive social relationships, participation in spiritual activities, and opportunities to pursue activities of interest. Once protective factors that foster resiliency have been identified, then parents, schools, community groups, government bodies, and social service agencies can work hard to foster opportunities that will ensure that every young person in Nigeria is exposed to these protective factors.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made.

- Further research should be conducted to replicate the findings of this study, as well as examine the nature of resiliency in the Nigerian context.
- The top factor that predicted resiliency was a safe home and community. This means that security agencies should work hard to ensure that communities are safe. Parents should also be educated about how to create a safe home environment.
- Other protective factors that fostered resiliency included physical activity, positive social relationships, participation in spiritual activities, and opportunities to pursue activities of interest. Therefore, schools and other community organizations should provide opportunities for young people to develop holistically. This

includes space for young people to engage in physical leisure activities, opportunities for positive social interactions, engaging spiritual activities designed for young people, and opportunities for young people to pursue other leisure activities.

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