

A special issue on child abuse and resilience in sub-Saharan Africa:

The role of multisystemic resilience-enablers

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Sub-Saharan Africa's children are projected to become the world's largest child population by 2055 (UNICEF, 2019). In addition to its vast size, this population is vulnerable to pronounced health and well-being threats (OECD, 2019), including abuse and neglect (Meinck et al., 2014). Despite concerted efforts, it has proven difficult to prevent such threats and so championing the resilience of sub-Saharan children must be central to their enablement. Resilience is adversity-exposed children's capacity to develop normatively or function adaptively (Masten, 2014).

Understood multisystemically, that capacity transcends children's personal (i.e. biological and psychological) resources to encompass resources that are distributed across the social and ecological systems to which children are connected (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; Masten et al., 2021; Ungar, 2018, 2019, 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020). Moreover, these multisystem resources interact – within and across systems – to co-enable positive outcomes (Ungar, 2021). Importantly, situational and cultural context shapes the multisystemic resources that matter more, or less, for children's resilience (Masten et al., 2021; Theron et al., 2021). In short, adversity-exposed children's capacity for positive outcomes requires a contextually relevant composite of multisystem resources.

While the preceding resilience-focused special issues of *Child Abuse & Neglect* advanced attention to the multisystemic nature of children's resilience to maltreatment

(Theron & Ungar, 2018; Tonmyr & Wekerle, 2013), they were not focused on the power of a given situational and cultural context – such as that of sub-Saharan Africa – to shape which multisystemic resources mattered more, or less. Further, except for a single paper (Romero et al., 2018), the studies included in those resilience-focused special issues were not about children in sub-Saharan Africa. That should perhaps not be surprising, given the scant attention historically to what supports the resilience of sub-Saharan children to maltreatment (Meinck et al., 2014). Still, if the resilience of Africa’s children is to be advanced, particularly in contextually relevant ways, then disrupting the inattention to the resilience of sub-Saharan children is overdue. This current special issue of *Child Abuse & Neglect*, which is specific to the multisystemic resilience of sub-Saharan children with maltreatment experiences, halts that inattention. In so doing, it signals evidence-informed, contextually relevant, systemic pathways of resilience that will be useful to lay or professional persons who wish to champion the resilience of the African children challenged by abuse or neglect. Ultimately, it dissuades resilience-enabling initiatives that are not distributed across multiple co-acting systems and that disrespect African ways-of-being and -doing.

The first article is written by the editors of this special issue – Theron and van Breda – and is a critical analysis of peer-reviewed literature across Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa regarding the resilience of children and youth with exposure to maltreatment. The authors find that the primary systemic resilience resources reported are in the family↔community nexus, involving primarily supportive and enabling relationships in the social domain. In addition, however, there is a significant body of research showing that institutional supports (such as community organizations, schools, and churches) are also important, particularly when multiple institutions interact, creating multifaceted networks of support. Finally, this paper finds that the natural and built environments appear infrequently in the literature. The

authors conclude that resilience in this ecological context is optimized when multiple social and institutional systems collaborate.

The article by Abdullah, Cudjoe, Jordan, and Emery addresses polyvictimized young adults in urban and peri-urban slum areas of Ghana, referred to as Zongo communities. Qualitative interviews with 23 youth found that cultural values, such as solidarity, peer support and cultural capital, were important in promoting participants' resilience to polyvictimization. A 'base' within Zongo communities offers a structure within which youth could gather and support each other. The authors show that it is this combination of two systems – a socio-cultural one and a physical space in the built environment – that creates a resilience-enabling social environment for youth in Ghana.

Gentz, Zeng, and Ruiz-Casares write about children in Namibia who are exposed to violence at home (from adult caregivers) or school (from peers). Drawing on a sample of 2124 school children with an average age of 11 years, the authors found that children's relationships at school and home were more protective for subjective well-being than material well-being, the severity of the violence and child demographics (such as orphan/non-orphan, grade, gender and rural/urban). The authors conclude that interventions that strengthen family and school relationships are key to building systemic resilience for school children in Namibia.

In their article about adolescents at risk of child abuse in Ethiopia, Jones, Pinock, Emirie, Gebeyehu, and Yadete report on qualitative data from 595 adolescents and 77 service providers and key informants. They found that participants draw primarily on social support from family, peers, and youth organizations. However, the support from these is misaligned with the structural support that should come from formal services, which instead tend to undermine children's rights and permit child vulnerability to abuse. They conclude that

system alignment across multiple formal and informal systems is essential for resilience to child abuse in Ethiopia.

Shevell and Denov critically reflect on the resilience of children and youth born of genocidal rape in Rwanda. They propose a multisystemic model of resilience that incorporates family, community, national, global, and intergenerational dimensions, and then draw on secondary data to illustrate the empirical manifestation of their model. In so doing, they show the ways family processes, community service and justice systems, national post-genocide developmental and reconciliation initiatives, and intergenerational processes contribute a multisystemic resilience context for children born of rape. By contrast, the authors show that global resilience, while evident in certain other instances (such as the current Covid crisis), has been largely absent in the global response to the Rwandan genocide. While children born of rape have been neglected in the Rwandan case, the authors conclude that their multidimensional model offers an inclusive and comprehensive framework for resilience research and practice.

Finally, Wessells provides a practice-focused commentary on the special issue. He highlights key contributions of the articles, not least that they provide a concerted focus on sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, he mentions the importance of multiple systems intersecting, of the economic and material domains, of the centrality (but complex role) of culture, and of intergenerational processes for building children and youth's resilience to maltreatment. He also notes several important challenges faced by resilience practice in sub-Saharan Africa, including a pervasive focus on single-system interventions, the influence of donors who want swift returns on investment, the importing of interventions from the Global North into Africa and the need to promote social justice and peace building.

This collection of publications on multisystemic resilience in sub-Saharan Africa assists in drawing attention both to the unique (and universal) aspects of resilience in Africa and to the importance and potential of a multisystemic approach to resilience, particularly in complex contexts facing wicked problems.

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