

Research Article

# Family Climate and Personal Resilience Among Children Victims of Sexual Abuse in Abidjan

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## Abstract

In Ivory Coast, the proportion of children victims of sexual abuse has become increasingly worrying since the post electoral crisis of 2011. This study aims to analyze the effect of family climate on the personal resilience construction of children victims of sexual abuse. It is so based on the working hypothesis that children victims of sexual abuse who benefit from a supportive family climate are more resilient than those who evolve in a non-supportive family climate. The study was conducted following a qualitative methodological approach with a descriptive aim, with 22 children of both sexes, victims of sexual abuse and aged from 06 to 13 years old. These children were selected by a reasoned choice at the Infant Guidance Center of Abidjan. They were subjected to a semi-structured interview from May 09 to August 10, 2022. The results, interpreted in the light of the theory of attachment, indicate that the family climate is decisive in the construction of personal resilience in children victims of sexual abuse. These results show the importance of raising awareness about the children sexual abuse and the need to provide support to the families of sexually abused children with a view to strengthening their capacity of resilience when facing such a serious phenomenon.

## Keywords

Family Climate, Resilience, Child, Victim, Sexual Abuse

## 1. Introduction

The rhythm of life, by alternating happy and unhappy events, often exposes individuals and human groups to stressful or traumatic situations. In this condition, those individuals and groups are called upon to build their resilience, with a view to well-being, and to healthy social adjustment. The concept of "resilience", meaning to rebound, was initially used exclusively in the field of physics to designate the capacity of resistance of a body or a material to a shock or to a deformation [1]. It was subsequently extended to several other areas. In psychology particularly, it is defined as the unsus-

pected capacity of a wounded subject, therefore in pain, to bounce back after a psychotrauma, by drawing deep within himself latent resources, to transform fragility into wealth and overcome one's living difficulties [2]. The "resilience" is the ability to emerge victorious from a traumatic ordeal, despite the risks, with self-recovery [3-5].

There are four main types of resilience [6]. These are personal, community (or collective), organizational and social resilience. Whatever the form, resilience refers to the ability to continue to live, function, grow and adapt after a trauma or

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a disaster. Currently, the concept "resilience" integrates contemporary multidisciplinary approaches: clinical, psychopathological and socio-educational. Analyzing the concept, an author [7] affirms that it originates from the Latin *resilientia*, a term usually used in materials physics to designate the resistance of material to high shocks, and the ability of a structure to absorb the kinetic energy of the environment without breaking. Related to living matter, the concept of "resilience" designates the art of adapting to adverse situations (biological and socio-psychological conditions) by developing capacities that bring into play internal – intrapsychic – and external process linked to the social and affective environment. The concept thus appears to be a complex process resulting from an interaction between the individual and his environment. This last observation is interesting in view of the analogy made between inanimate matter and living matter. Indeed, if the resilience of steel is considered to be due to the very nature of the material, it is not so in the human person where external psycho-affective, relational and social factors interfere. Researches in this area show that the resilience of an individual depends on the stages of his psychological development, his life cycle and the environmental circumstances [7]. In this perspective, the potential resources in the individual are activated either spontaneously by the individual or by the effect of external companions such as parents, educators, friends and caregivers.

In the present study, the interest will therefore be focused on children's personal resilience in relation with their family climate. Indeed, children are not spared from stressful or traumatic situations. Particularly, the sexual abuse against them is part of their highly traumatic experiences which are manifested by various psychological symptoms [8]. The sequels of these sexual abuses can extend to their parents, especially mothers [9-11], to their communities and to the whole society. However, cases of sexual abuse perpetrated all over the world on children are recorded daily and are increasingly unveiled. On average, 7 cases are reported per day [12]. Although their real extent is partially known, because of their under-reporting, estimates nevertheless indicate that one in three girls and one in five boys is abused before the age of 18 [13].

In Ivory Coast, sexual abuse cases have multiplied since the post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011 [14]. Thus, 19% of girls compared to 11% of boys under the age of 18 have been victims [15]. However, being a victim of sexual abuse during this period of life characterized by physical, emotional, social and sexual immaturity constitutes a real ordeal which must be overcome by the children who have been exposed to it, so that their underway growth can be proceeded smoothly. It has been shown that individuals of both sexes and of all ages can overcome any suffering that occurs to them, even if they keep scars [16]. Moreover, maternal presence and response at the time of sexual abuse disclosure are key factors in child adaptation [17, 18]. Many previous studies have focused on the traumatic consequences of child sexual abuse [19, 20], but have hardly addressed the building of their personal resilience.

Taking care of this concern, the present study proposes to answer the following question: what effect does the family climate have on the personal resilience of children victims of sexual abuse in Abidjan?

The general objective of the study is to determine the influence of family climate on the personal resilience among children victims of sexual abuse. The study leans on the attachment theory [21], which is based on the postulate that attachment is a survival process that children use to seek closeness with privileged adults in order to be protected from possible danger.

The study is based on the general hypothesis that the personal resilience of children victims of sexual abuse varies according to the quality of the climate prevailing in their family of origin. The operational hypothesis states that children victims of sexual abuse who benefit from a supportive family climate are more resilient than those who have a non-supportive family climate.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Variables

The study brings together two types of variables. There are the independent variable and the dependent one.

#### 2.1.1. Independent Variable: Family Climate

The independent variable of this study is the family climate and refers to the quality of the family atmosphere as perceived and described by the respondents. It's qualitative variable and admits two modalities. These were supportive family climate and unsupportive family climate. The first modality reflects a climate of security, warmth, support, affection and attention following the disclosure of the sexual abuse suffered by the children. The second modality reflects a climate of danger, hostility and coldness towards children victims of sexual abuse following the disclosure of the abuse suffered.

#### 2.1.2. Dependent Variable: Personal Resilience

The dependent variable of this study is the personal resilience, which designates the time taken by a child victim of sexual abuse to develop his ability to overcome his trauma caused by the sexual abuse suffered by using his available resources.

This variable is also qualitative with two modalities, namely the faster construction of personal resilience and the slower one. The construction of personal resilience, according to León and Michon [22], is said to be faster when the child takes a short time (less than 6 months) to regain a relative psychological balance after the sexual abuse suffered. On the other hand, it is qualified as slower, when there is a chronicization of the signs of the trauma in the latter (beyond 6 months).

## 2.2. Framework, Type and Period of the Study

This study was carried out in a structure providing medico-psychological care for children, especially for those who are victims of sexual abuse. This structure named the Infant Guidance Center (CGI) of the National Institute of Public Health (INSP) of Abidjan is a public one. The study was a qualitative descriptive one carried out from May 9 to August 10, 2022, that's to say in over a period of three months.

## 2.3. Study Sample

The study sample was made of 22 children. These are cases of proven sexual abuse identified at the CGI of the INSP on the study period. Among these 22 children, there are 13 girls and 9 boys. They also had benefited from medico-psychological care at the CGI of the INSP. These children were between the ages of 6 and 13, lived with their two biological parents, were in possession of all their mental faculties and had, in agreement with their parents, expressed their informed consent to participate in the study. Their characteristics are listed in the table below.

*Table 1. Characteristics of study sample members.*

Variables	Characteristics	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Girls	13	59,09
	Boys	09	40,91
Age group	06-09 years old	10	45,46
	10-13 years old	12	54,54
Education	Out of school	08	36,36
	At school	14	63,64

Source: Field survey May-August 2022

According to this table, the members of our study sample – children victims of sexual abuse – were 22 with a female predominance (59,09%). Their age oscillated between 06 and 13 years with a maximum of 10-13 years (54,54%). 36,36% of them were out of school against 63,64% who respectively attended primary and secondary cycles.

## 2.4. Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used as the data collection tool for this study. It is structured around four major points. The first point concerned the bio-sociodemographic characteristics of study participants. The second point was focused on the presentation of the characteristics of the sexual abuse suffered by the children. The third point described their family climate. The fourth and last point concerned the influence of

the family climate on the capacity to build personal resilience. The study data then collected was subjected to a thematic content analysis.

## 3. Results

The result presentation will be structured around two points. This involves in one hand the description of the sexual abuse committed on the children concerned by the study and, in the other hand, the determination of the link between the family climate and the capacity to build personal resilience.

### 3.1. Description of Sexual Abuse Committed on the Children

The characteristics of the sexual abuse committed on the children surveyed are recorded in the table below.

*Table 2. Characteristics of children sexual abuse.*

Variable	Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Form of sexual abuse	Individual	14	63,64
	Collective	08	36,36
Type of sexual abuse	Heterosexual	13	59,09
	Homosexual	09	40,91
Location of abuse	Intrafamily	09	40,91
	Extrafamily	13	59,09
Perpetrators	Adults	15	68,19
	Minors	06	27,27
Number of perpetrators in collective abuse	Unidentified	01	04,54
	02 perpetrators	03	37,50
Violence associated with individual sexual abuse	More than 02 perpetrators	05	62,50
	Physical	10	71,43
Violence associated with collective sexual abuse	Psychological	10	71,43
	Physical	07	87,50
	Psychological	07	87,50

Source: Field survey May-August 2022: Interview with children and their parents

According to this table, 63.64% of the children had suffered individual sexual abuse against 36.36% among whom the sexual abuse was collective. The sexual abuses were heterosexual in 59.09% of cases, and homosexual in 40.91% of cases. They took place outside the family in 59.09% of cases,

and within the family in 40.91% of cases. The perpetrators had not been disclosed in 04.54% of cases, and those identified were mostly adults (68,19%) against 27.27% minors. At the level of collective sexual abuse, the number of perpetrators varied from 2 to 7 individuals and, in 62.5% of this collective abuse, the number of perpetrators exceeded 2. The sexual abuse, whether individual or collective, had been mostly associated with physical and psychological violence.

### 3.2. Family Climate and Ability to Build Personal Resilience

From the 22 children victims of sexual abuse who took part in the study, a little more than half (12) who had benefited from a supportive family climate after the disclosure of the sexual abuse suffered, had a great capacity for building their personal resilience according to the following testimony:

Norbert, 9-year-old boy and individual abuse survivor: "Since this happened, dad has become nicer. Every Saturday we go out together and that makes me very happy"

Conversely, their peers (10) who had not benefited from a supportive family climate had a lower capacity to build their personal resilience, as evidenced by the following testimonies:

Clémentine, 13-year-old girl and survivor of collective abuse: "My parents spent all their time insulting me; they said I had looked for what had happened to me and I should stop pretending to be sad".

Lala, 12-year-old girl and survivor of individual abuse: "My mother no longer wanted to see me because according to her, I had ruined her home. And his attitude made me very sad, I was always angry with those around me, sometimes even, I no longer wanted to live".

## 4. Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine the influence of family climate on the construction of personal resilience among children victims of sexual abuse. To do this, we described the characteristics of the sexual abuse perpetrated on them before establishing the link between the family climate and the construction of personal resilience. Thus 22 children of both sexes with a female predominance (68.18%) were investigated. The age group among the children most affected by the scourge was that of 10-13 years (58.18%). 63.64% had suffered individual sexual abuse against 36.36% who had suffered collective sexual abuse.

The results at the end of our investigation indicate, among the 22 children surveyed victims of sexual abuse, that a little more than half (12) who had benefited from a supportive family climate after the disclosure of the sexual abuse suffered, had begun to build of their personal resilience more quickly compared to their peers (10) who had evolved in an unsupportive family climate.

By referring to Bowlby's attachment theory [21], we can

explain that the quality of the family climate influences the construction of personal resilience in children victims of sexual abuse. On one hand, for the children who had benefited from a supportive family climate, the parents felt guilty for having had a share of the responsibility in the sexual abuse committed on their children for not having sufficiently protected them. Thus, this drama had allowed them to get closer to their children, to have a quality presence, in order to try to repair what could still be and allow them to feel better. This had increased their ability to build personal resilience. The climate that reigned in those families was that of security, affection and attention. It was mainly observed in monogamous families, and was for the children, an asset to overcome their traumas caused by sexual abuse.

On the other hand, for the children who had not benefited from a supportive family climate, the parents held them solely responsible for the misfortune that had befallen them. For this reason, they showed them no compassion. The unfounded accusations, the insults, the rejection, the family conflicts generated or aggravated by the disclosure of the sexual abuse had led to a breakdown in the parent-child relationship. Above all, this family climate had led the respondents to a great disappointment and a feeling of guilt that constituted additional wounds in them and hindered their ability to build their personal resilience. This situation worsened when the sexual abuse was an incestuous type, in particular stepfather stepdaughter. This unsupportive family climate was observed in single-parent (06) and blended families.

However, there are works that tend to contradict these results. So, it has been pointed out [23] that there is an overrepresentation of orphans in the population of creative people. He also indicates a huge number of famous authors who suffered from an early age either from a long early separation or the loss of their parents. Particularly, the family history of famous authors such as the writer Katherine Mansfield, the philosopher William James, the scholar Isaac Newton (to mention only a few) shows that these illustrious celebrities have in common the fact of having been the only child of their siblings to have experienced rejection – sometimes accompanied by physical separation – from their mother at an early age in their live. How is it that these famous people, although having achieved success in their literary works or their scientific discoveries, encountered difficulties in their psycho-affective development and in their intimate adult life? Maternal rejection can thus explain the disturbances observed in the adult affective life of these people but, at the same time, caused the development of their spirit of creativity. Moreover, the analysis of the relationship to creativity and creation of subjects with bruised childhood [24] leads to conclude that those famous authors draw inspiration for their novels from their overcome childhood wounds. These cases remain in the minority.

The results corroborate the conclusions of many previous works which report that whatever the trauma, individuals of both sexes and of all ages can overcome it, even if they keep

scars [25]. They also corroborate previous work that highlights the responsibility of parents in building personal resilience in children [26, 27], and those works revealed that parents who fail to provide a climate of trust in their children after a traumatic event do not help them to build their personal resilience [28]. They are similar to the works which indicate that the child faced with a psychic trauma is incapable of coping alone without the help of "resilience tutors", and that the first and most important of all these tutors of resilience are the parents [2].

## 5. Conclusions

According to its objective to determine the influence of the family climate on the construction of personal resilience among children victims of sexual abuse in Abidjan, this study was conducted by means of a qualitative methodological approach with a descriptive aim. The data were collected using a semi-directive interview administered to a sample of 22 children selected in the Infant's Guidance Center of Abidjan. The results indicate that the family climate is decisive in the construction of personal resilience in children victims of sexual abuse. This work then suggests that raising on the seriousness of sexual abuse against children, as well as support for parents in difficulty, should be offered to the families of sexually abused children. In the field of research, other works should subsequently be carried out in order to quantify the level of resilience and detect the weight of the family climate in the combination of factors likely to strengthen the level of resilience in these child victims of sexual abuse.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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