

# Autonomy Related Actions within Peer Group Spaces and Resilient Identity among Mid Adolescents in Mbengwi Sub Division in Cameroon

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**Abstract:** This study investigated “Autonomy Related Actions within Peer Group Spaces and Resilient Identity among Mid Adolescents” in Mbengwi Sub Division, Northwest Region of Cameroon. Some mid adolescents in Mbengwi are faced with adverse conditions such as, poverty, low socioeconomic status, and loss of parent or parents that put them at risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems. Despite all these adversities faced by these adolescents, most of them still cope and develop successfully. Their ability to overcome such adversities often results from the interplay of individual characteristics, the characteristics of the family, as well as those of the physical, social environment and the peer group. Hence, this study investigated whether autonomy related actions within peer group spaces fosters the development of resilient identity among mid adolescents. A concurrent mixed method design of both the descriptive survey and ethnographic design were used to conduct this study. A sample of 300 mid adolescents and 10 parents were chosen for this study using purposive and incidental sampling techniques. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse collected data. Based on the above, it was realised that the predictor variables “autonomy related actions within peer spaces among mid adolescents” ( $X^2=79.221$ ;  $df=5$ ;  $P<0.001$ ), significantly foster the development of resilient identity (social competence, sense of purpose and problem solving) among mid adolescents. It should be noted that, the autonomy related actions within peer spaces among mid adolescents that foster resilient identity include; taking and acting on personal decisions confidently without any social validation, self-governing themselves, their behaviours and their activities, managing and spending their money responsibly, maintaining mature emotional connections with adults and peers and strongly believing that anything they want to do, they should do it well and successfully. At the end of the study, recommendations were pointed out for the empowerment of adolescent peer groups.

**Keywords:** Autonomy Related Actions, Peer Group Spaces, Peer Culture, Resilient Identity and Mid Adolescents.

## I. Introduction

This study investigated “Autonomy Related Actions within Peer Group Spaces and Resilient Identity among Mid Adolescents” in Mbengwi Sub Division, Northwest region of Cameroon. The study therefore, focused on autonomy related actions within peer group spaces in relationship to the development of resilient identity among mid adolescents. Autonomy is an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of constructs, including independence, self-reliance, detachment, agency, self-governance, self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-determination, and alienation (Beyers et al, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2006). African children’s agency is discernible in parental values that permit peer group life and support self-care and performance of household duties from an early age. It is also noticeable in children’s capacity to transcend adult models by creating their own social worlds, even when living up to adult orders (Nsamenang & Lamb, 1995). Children’s agency and

protagonism is also evident in youths who support ailing parents or ageing guardians, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS.

Adolescents in different parts of Cameroon are faced with adverse conditions, of which some of them are less likely to cope with such conditions and consequently they often develop emotional or behavioural problems. For example, some adolescents in the Mbengwi Sub Division are faced with adverse conditions such as poverty, low socioeconomic status, constant failure, family conflict and loss of parent or parents that put them at risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems. Despite the above adversities faced by these children, they still manage to sail through life successfully. Without their ability to cope with life adversities, it would be difficult for them to realise their future aspirations. Therefore their ability to overcome such adversities often results from the interplay of their personal attributes, the characteristics of the family, as well as those of the physical and social environment including the peer group. Even though adolescent peer group and peer culture have both positive and negative impact on adolescents behaviour and development, based on some research evidence peer culture is an important agency of child development especially through; the activities mid adolescents engage in, the values they uphold and the independent decisions they take and act on autonomously within peer groups that enable them to share ideas and learn skills from each other, thus helping them to cope normally with their difficulties. The main purpose of this study was to examine the role autonomy related actions within peer group spaces plays in fostering the development of resilient identity among (15-17 years old adolescents) in Mbengwi sub Division.

## **II. Background to the study**

The concept of children's agency has been used in varied ways; that is children are seen as cognizing and experiencing 'agents' who are capable of autonomous action and cultural creation (Nsamenang, 2008). Agency is a theoretic concept that positions children as self-conscious members of the family and society right from the beginning and agency can also be considered as one of the important strands to the development of resilient identity and peer culture. Children are active participants in family and communal life. There is no doubt that children are agentive in the sense of having the capacity to experience, make meaning, interact, act, produce and reproduce progressively in the course of development.

African cultures separate the learning of skills for socially shared support of the family (Weisner, 1987) from the life stage of parenthood but integrate them into cultural curricula for children to learn as part of their developmental knowledge (Nsamenang, 2008). From their toddler years, even from younger ages through adolescence, most African children are immersed in social networks in homes, schools and diverse neighbourhood settings. In such settings, parents or other adults only partially play direct developmental roles or inputs as siblings or peers become more salient developmental partners in children's daily routines. This has permitted the African youth to be able to cope with stressful events and develop resilient identity. Resilience is linked with two important attributes acquired by children in well-run programmes, reciprocity, a collaborative spirit which values shared activities and the contributions of peers and resourcefulness, the ability to identify the most important resources (including human resources) for resolving any difficulty, large or small, in any environment (Brooker, 2008). In this light such agentive strategies found in peer cultures permits African children and adolescents navigate the harsh realities of their circumstances to survive and make progress on their own devices.

According to Nsamenang (2008), the evidence for such agency is more evident within African family traditions and peer cultures than in the school or formal institutional education, though versions of it are to be found therein; they remain mostly unexploited, however. The largely ignored ingenuities that underwrite indigenous African craft and art work have their origins in such inventive agency, but spuriously adopted colonial school curricula, research agendas and policy development in much of Africa have hitherto ignored its potentially transformative processes and outcomes (Nsamenang, 2008). In the same light, Devor's (1970) interpretation of agent as shorthand for agent of socialization fits with African theories that exude parental values that

recognize children's innate abilities for reciprocal socialization, collective learning and peer mentoring (Nsamenang, 2002, 2004). Inducted into such theories, with supportive social capital, African parents socialise children in the children's becoming 'not as a set of organisms to be moulded into a pattern of behaviour specified in advance as educational outcomes, but as newcomers to a community of practice, for whom the desirable outcome of a period of apprenticeship is that they would appropriate the system of meanings that informs the community's practices' (Erny, 1968; Serpell, 2008).

Within the theoretical framework of agency, children and adolescents should neither be analyzed as outsiders to society nor as mere inductees into adult society; rather, they are bona fide citizens with interests, talents, collaborative actions and resistances (UNICEF, 2003) and their collective action must therefore be taken into explicit account in theory, research and policy. Within the framework of Hart's (2002) wisdom, agency calls for science based proliferation of strategies to ease Africa's young citizens' reflective appraisals of their appalling conditions so that they would begin to gradually take greater responsibility as they develop for creating societies and nations different from the ones they live in or have inherited.

By fostering children's close identification with social networks and peer contexts, African social values can be seen to align with Erikson's (1968) focus on social development. For example, African social rites of naming, marriage, death, etc. effortlessly transition the identity of the individual through developmental phases (Pence & Nsamenang, 2008). Identity formation has been most extensively described by Erikson (1968), who saw identity formation and autonomy as beginning in childhood and gaining prominence during adolescence. Faced with physical growth, sexual maturation, and impending career choices and family formation, adolescents must accomplish the task of integrating their prior experiences and characteristics into a stable adult identity. Erikson (1968), coined the phrase 'identity crisis' to describe the temporary instability and confusion adolescents experience as they struggle with competing alternatives and choice points. In Africa today, confusion and crises are inherent in old and new ways coexisting in the same countries, communities, and individual lives (Nsamenang & Dawes, 1998).

Nevertheless, the majority of African children and youth are not overly defeated by their difficult circumstances but instead navigate their challenges successfully into productive pathways, surprisingly often outside official agendas. More research is needed about how these African youth successfully produce competent African self-identities (Nsamenang, 2012). Interaction in mixed-age groups elicits pro-social behaviours and social cognition that are important in the social and cognitive development of the young child. Such pro-social behaviours as help-giving, sharing, and turn-taking facilitate interaction and promote socialization and affective bonding.

According to Nsamenang (2012), peer cultures are childhood spaces for socializing, exploratory play, play and learning, differing and worrying in child- to-child worlds with limited to no adult presence. More importantly, peer cultures train in responsibility taking, but lamentably, African peer spaces have been little researched and remain uncharted developmental niches, thus this study explored peer culture to fill this gap. Multi-age, multi-sex peer groups offer greater freedom to children to function on their own terms than adult- child relationships. In them, children learn from competition, cooperation, antagonisms and handling of conflicts and problems with minimal to no adult intrusion. Urie Bronfenbrenner in his (1979) Ecological Systems Theory sees the peer group as one of the elements of the microsystem environment that interrelate among various microsystem environments, such as home, school, neighbourhood and religious groups thus influencing the child's development.

### **III. Methods**

Methodologically, both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms were taken into consideration to conduct this study (concurrent mixed method research design). The sample of this study was made up of 300 mid adolescents and 10 parents selected from 23 villages in the Mbengwi sub-division, North West region of Cameroon. To begin with, in order to collect quantitative data, the descriptive survey design with the aid of a questionnaire made up of close ended items was used

in conducting this study. In this light, making use of purposive and incidental sampling techniques, data were collected only from some respondents (mid adolescents living in adverse conditions) who were considered relevant for this study. In addition, in order to collect rich and qualitative data, the ethnographic/phenomenological design with the aid of a Focus Group Discussion Guide and an Interview Guide made up of open ended questions were also used in conducting this study. In this light information that were obtained from the Focus Group Discussion Guide and the Interview Guide made up of open ended questions were used to buttress the information that was obtained from the questionnaire made up of close ended items.

The instruments were validated in two phases. That is face validity and content validity in order to ensure validity and reliability of the instruments and to ensure that the instruments used were actually measuring what they were intended to measure. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to 300 mid adolescents who were purposively and incidentally chosen by the researcher, from 23 villages in Mbengwi Sub Division. The copies of questionnaire were administered to mid adolescents, using the self-delivery technique. More so to easily administer the instruments to respondents, two devoted members of the community were trained and used as research assistants to assist in the data collection process. In addition to administering copies of the questionnaire to respondents, a Focus Group Discussion Guide was also administered to respondents through the use of Focus Group Discussions to 60 mid adolescents purposively chosen for this study. Six groups made up of at least 10 mid adolescents each were selected for this exercise that is two of the groups were made of boys only; two of girls only and the other two were made up of both girls and boys. A maximum of 3 hours was used per day for each Focus Group Discussion. Probing and prompting were also used to get more information that was valid from respondents and to redirect respondents especially when they were not answering some of the questions in track.

Finally, data were analysed following a triangulation approach in methodology, analytical process and statistical packages. The Epi-Data Version 3.1 and Epi-Info 6.04d were used for data entry and analyses with the support of SPSS 20.0. Two modelling approaches were used to establish the explanatory power of the predictor variable over the outcome variable and to appraise the effect of critical indicators of both variables. The models were Binary Logistic Regression Model (BLRM) and Log-Likelihood Ratio test. The relationship between indicators was appraised using the Chi-Square test of independence. Inter-item relationship or association was assessed using the non-parametric Spearman's rho correlation test. Reliability or internal consistency of responses was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha reliability test. For the analysis of qualitative data; thematic, content and grounded conceptual modelling with the support of Atlas Ti 5.2 was used.

#### **IV. Measures**

Items were measured using a 4 point Likert scale questionnaire. The questionnaire was made up of closed ended statements. For each of the statements, respondents were required to state how they feel about each item that is stating whether they strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD). The questionnaire was made up of two parts that is part one and part two. Part one contained items on respondents' personal characteristics such as; sex, age, duration of stay in the village, respondents' schooling status, respondents' class, category of adversity faced by respondents, social network support systems that help respondents to overcome and cope normally with difficulties and by respondents' village. Part two contained items pertaining to the variables of the study that is autonomy related actions within peer group spaces in relationship to the development of resilient identity among mid adolescents. Table 1 below shows clearly the different measures that were used to measure autonomy related actions within peer group spaces in relationship to the development of resilient identity among mid adolescents.

**Table 1: Distribution of autonomy related actions among mid adolescents within peer groups**

<b>Autonomy among mid adolescent within peer groups</b>	<b>Strongly agreed</b>	<b>Agreed</b>	<b>Disagreed</b>	<b>Strongly disagreed</b>	<b>N</b>
We take and act on personal decisions confidently without any social validation.	125 (41.7%)	152 (50.7%)	21 (7.0%)	2 (0.7%)	300
We are able to self-govern ourselves, our behaviours and our activities.	157 (52.2%)	124 (41.3%)	12 (4.0%)	7 (2.3%)	300
We decide on how to manage and spend our money responsibly.	164 (54.7%)	131 (43.7%)	4 (1.3%)	1 (0.3%)	300
We are able to maintain mature emotional connections with adults and peers.	139 (46.3%)	145 (48.3%)	5 (1.7%)	11 (3.7%)	300
We strongly believe that anything we want to do, we should do it well and successfully.	197 (65.7%)	96 (32.0%)	3 (1.0%)	4 (1.3%)	300
<b>MRS (Aggregated score)</b>	<b>782 (52.13%)</b>	<b>648 (43.2%)</b>	<b>45 (3%)</b>	<b>25 (1.66%)</b>	<b>1500 (100%)</b>

From table 1 above, autonomy among mid adolescents within peer groups equally proved to be an important indicator of peer culture that plays an important role in fostering the development of resilient identity (social competence, sense of purpose and problem solving).

Considering the components that made up this indicator, 152 (50.7%) and 125(41.7%) respectively agreed and strongly agreed that the first component “we take and act on personal decisions confidently without any social validation” was necessary for the development of resilient identity among mid adolescents; meanwhile, 21 (7.0%) and 2 (0.7%) participants respectively disagreed and strongly disagreed against the importance of this component.

Concerning the second component “we are able to self-govern ourselves, our behaviours and our activities” as a way of fostering the development of resilient identity, 124 (41.3%) and 157 (52.2%) respectively agreed and strongly agreed to the importance of this component; while 12 (4.0%) and 7 (2.3%) of the respondents respectively disagreed and strongly disagreed against the importance of this component.

Looking at the third component “we decide on how to manage and spend our money responsibly”, 131 (43.7%) and 164 (54.7%) agreed and strongly agreed of its importance in fostering the development of resilient identity; whereas 4 (1.3%) and 1 (0.3%) disagreed and strongly disagreed against its importance.

As far as the fourth component “we are able to maintain mature emotional connections with adults and peers” is concerned, 145 (48.3%) and 139 (46.3%) agreed and strongly agreed that it was important in fostering the development of resilient identity; While 5 (1.7%) and 11 (3.7%) disagreed and strongly disagreed on the importance of the component.

Finally with regards to the fifth component “we strongly believe that anything we want to do, we should do it well and successfully” had 96 (32.0%) and 197 (65.7%) participants who agreed and strongly agreed to the importance of the component to the development of resilient identity; while 3 (1.0%) and 4 (1.3%) participants disagreed and strongly disagreed on the importance of the indicator to the development of resilient identity.

## V. Results

**Table 2: Likelihood ratio tests predicting the effect of autonomy related actions among mid adolescents on resilient identity**

Predictors	Score	DF	Sig
We take and act on personal decisions confidently without any social validation.	10.779	1	.001
We are able to self-govern ourselves, our behaviours and our activities.	21.827	1	.000
We decide on how to manage and spend our money responsibly.	36.110	1	.000
We are able to maintain mature emotional connections with adults and peers.	11.699	1	.001
We strongly believe that anything we want to do, we should do it well and successfully.	27.832	1	.000
<b>Overall Statistics</b>	<b>65.673</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>.000</b>

Binary Logistic Regression Model was used to appraise the effect of autonomy related actions among mid adolescents on resilient identity. The variability explained by the model was significant (Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficient: Likelihood Ratio Tests: Chi-Square=79.221; df=5; P<0.001; N=300). The explanatory power of the model was 31.0% (Nagelkerke R Square =0.310). The validity of the model is also confirmed by the Hosmer-Lemeshow Test. This test evaluates how the observed frequencies versus expected frequencies agree over the entire range of probability values. This test is a chi-square test that compares the difference between observed and expected frequencies for each of the 2 \* 5 matrix.

With this test, a non-significant chi-square is desired as to confirm the assumption that the model being tested is not different from the perfect model therefore supporting the inference that the variability explained by the model is good. In the context of this model, this assumption is verified (Hosmer-Lemeshow test: Chi-Square=23.808; df=8; P=0.002; N=300).

The effect of the individual model indicator was equally computed as presented in the table 2 above. From table 2 above, it was realised that, all the indicators demarcated themselves as significant predictors of resilient identity (P<0.05) with “self-governance”, “managing/spending money responsibly” and “believing in success in any activity undertaken” (P=.000) as the most significant components, followed by “maintaining mature emotional connections with peers/adults” and “taking and acting on personal decisions without social validation” (P=.001).

The variability explained by the model was significant (Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficient: Likelihood Ratio Tests: Chi-Square=79.221; df=5; P<0.001; N=300). The explanatory power of the model was 31.0% (Nagelkerke R Square =0.310). Though this predictive power was moderate, the predictive effect of all the indicators was significant. Therefore in conclusion, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis retained indicating that, there is a significant relationship between autonomy related actions among mid adolescents and the development of resilient identity.

## VI. Discussion of findings

The above findings indicate that, mid adolescents identified with aspects of being autonomous within their peer groups, which include; taking and acting on personal decisions confidently without any social validation, self-governing themselves, their behaviours and their activities, deciding on how to manage and spend their money responsibly, maintaining mature emotional connections with adults and peers, believing that anything they want to do, they should do it well and successfully.

More so, it was realised that all the above aspects of being autonomous are cherished and encouraged by members of the community. In this light, such aspects of being autonomous were found to be very important in fostering the development of resilient identity (social competence,

sense of purpose and problem solving) among mid adolescents and thus enable them to be able to overcome and cope normally with the different difficulties and problems that they encounter.

The above findings are consistent with the findings of McWhirter, *et al.* (1998:87) who found out that with regards to autonomy, a strong internal locus of control among mid adolescents, makes them feel that they may be effective and have some sense of power or control over their environment and thus it becomes possible for them to hope, to plan, and to set personal goals. Without this internal locus of control, adolescents feel powerless. They may feel that forces outside them control and shape their lives (McWhirter, *et al.* 1998:87; Lewis 1999:202).

Wang *et al.* (1997:19) found out that, resilient adolescents are resourceful and flexible and can be independent when necessary and that this resourcefulness is what sets them apart and makes them feel that they are in control of their own lives. Capella & Weinstein (2001:759) and McWhirter, *et al.* (1998:82) added that the adolescent's feelings of mastery and the ability to delay gratification contribute to a sense of self-control and independent actions.

According to Erikson, (1968:135) in his psychosocial theory of human development, the adolescent begins to develop a personal sense of identity and to ask questions like "Who am I?" and "What does it mean to be me?" The adolescent begins to see himself as unique and separate from his or her parents. In his classic work, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, suggested that during adolescence individuals begin to develop an adult identity, the capacity for intimate relationships, and adult role responsibilities. The above finding of Erikson is consistent with this study in that, most mid adolescents as revealed by this study have the desire to be more independent and autonomous and to extricate his or herself from their parents and adult members of society and from the safety and security that his or her relationship with them offers. In his or her efforts to become and to be seen as an individual, it may sometimes seem as though he or she is being uncooperative.

In a similar study, Steinberg (2002) found out that, the development toward an increased independent functioning among mid adolescents yields emotional, behavioural, and cognitive manifestations. In same light according to Goossens (2006) & Steinberg (2002), focus should be on behavioural independence, and more specifically, on independent versus dependent decision making, because this is one of the more visible instances of independent functioning during mid-adolescence. Independent decision making refers to adolescents' increasing tendency to make decisions by themselves without consulting their parents and other adult members of society, for instance about how to spend their free time, manage their money, deciding on the type of activities or jobs to engage in and the type of friends to play and have leisure with. By contrast, parents' involvement in decision making indicates dependency, with unilateral parental decisions reflecting complete dependence and joint decision making indicating the midpoint between dependent and independent functioning. (Goossens, 2006; Steinberg, 2002)

Moreover, various studies have investigated the association of independent decision making with adjustment. However, it should be noted that the results of these studies are mixed. For instance, the degree of independent decision making has been found to be generally unrelated to the quality of adolescents' relationships with best friends and romantic partners (Smetana & Gettman, 2006). As well, using several large and diverse samples of middle adolescents, Dornbusch and colleagues found independent decision making to be related to a maladaptive pattern of psychosocial functioning and to problem behaviour in particular (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, & Gross 1985; Dornbusch, Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Chen, 1990).

More so, joint decision making was consistently associated with more adaptive functioning (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn, & Steinberg, 1993; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Given these diverging findings, subsequent research has attempted to identify the conditions under which independent decision making may relate positively or negatively to psychosocial functioning. For instance, Lamborn, Dornbusch & Steinberg (1996) found that the community context moderated the effects of independent decision making for at least some youths. Specifically, independent decision making was found to be associated with maladjustment among African American adolescents living in a predominantly white community.

Another factor that may qualify the association between independent decision making and outcomes is the social domain involved in the decision making. Independent decision making about private issues ( for example which clothes to wear, how to spend free time, what activity to engage in and who to play with), which typically fall under adolescents' personal jurisdiction (Nucci, 2001), has been found to be associated positively with youths' well-being (Hasebe, Nucci & Nucci, 2004; Qin, Pomerantz & Wang, 2009; Smetana, Campione-Barr & Daddis, 2004). On the contrary, high levels of independent decision making about moral and conventional issues, (for example how to talk to parents, keeping promises to others) which are expected to remain to some extent under the parents' jurisdiction (Smetana, 2000), have been found to relate to maladjustment.

## **VII. Implications of findings**

The findings from this study are outstanding because they provide greater insight into understanding the peer group as an important agency, that fosters the development of resilient identity among mid adolescents in Mbengwi in particular, Cameroon, Africa and around the world in general. The findings also confirm the supposition that like mid adolescents in other emerging economies, mid adolescents in Mbengwi within their different peer groups; engage in a good number of enriching and lucrative activities, uphold a good number of values that are highly cherished by members of the community and they also take and act on decisions autonomously and independently without any parental and adult intrusion and validation, which help them to overcome and cope normally with the different difficulties that they face.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Drawing inference from above, it is apparent that, there is a significant relationship between autonomy related actions among mid adolescents and the development of resilient identity. Some of the components of the indicator "autonomy" that mid adolescents identified with include; taking and acting on personal decisions confidently without any social validation, ability to self-govern themselves, their behaviours and their activities, deciding on how to manage and spend their money responsibly, maintaining mature emotional connections with adults and peers, believing that anything they want to do, they should do it well and successfully etc. It was equally realised that, these autonomous related actions mid adolescents identified with, fosters the development of resilience among them.

## **IX. Recommendations**

The following recommendations are put forward for parents, teachers, the clergy and other significant stake holders to address the problem of this study.

- Parents, family members, members of the community and stakeholders could guide, direct, respect, support and allow mid adolescents to take and act on decisions autonomously that could help improve upon their wellbeing. This will help mid adolescents to feel free in taking and acting on personal decisions based on parental and adult advice and thus making parents and adults to support them in time of difficulty.
- Teachers, educators, school counsellors and school psychologists could also be very observant and take note of the types of decisions mid adolescents take and act on. They should do so because, it will enable them to know whether such decisions mid adolescents take and act on are appropriate or not and thus enable them to guide, direct, help and counsel mid adolescents on how to take and act on different life decisions and how to choose a career in life that will make life worthwhile for mid adolescents in future.
- Social workers of NGOs and other related welfare services could also organised capacity and resilient building workshop forums, whereby they could sensitise mid adolescents on more positive life decisions they could take and act on in order to overcome and cope with the difficulties that they face. They could do so by first of all taking in to consideration some of the decisions mid adolescents take and act on within their peer groups as revealed by this study and

end up by sensitising mid adolescents on more life decisions and actions that could help them to be resilient.

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