

Challenging prevailing (negative) notions of youth:  
A review of findings from a recent resilience study  
of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone.



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# Defining “Resilience”

An innate ability or characteristic (Garmezy, 1993)

Brought about *by* adversity (Strumpfer, 2002)

Based on environmental resources and access (Ungar, 2011)

Linked to the ability to influence the environment (Wessells, 2005)

Competence (Masten, 1989; McAdam-Crisp, 2006)

Exists on a continuum, not absolutes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005)

Tied to ideology or cultural values (Barber, 1999)

- Purpose **Overview**
- Introduction to the study
- Screening instrumentation
- Youth enclaves, examining  
“community”
- The Elder Brother  
phenomenon

# Purpose of the study

- To challenge depictions of wholesale brokenness of a generation of Africans
- A response to “youth bulge” discourse and Afropessimism
- Shift focus from formal resettlement programs to self-settlement strategies
- Place former combatants at the center of their experience

# Theoretical Framework: A starting

- Youth as social category and construction  
point of understandings and

(Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Stainton Rogers, 1989; UNCRC, 1989)

## perspectives

- Resilience and the child soldier (Alvis Palma, 2009; Boyden & Mann, 2000; Garmezy, 1993; Masten, 1994, 2001; McAdam-Crisp, 2006; Rutter, 1987)
- Nestedness: Ecological theory (Boothby, 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989; Earls & Carlson, 2001; Germain, 1973, 1976, 1978, 1985, 1991; Wessells, 2002)
- Social role and community (re)integration (Biddle, 1979; Wessells & Jonah, 2006; Williamson, 2006)

- **NGO representatives:**

- PeaceLinks; Save the Children; Don Bosco; AUCAYD; Talking Drum

- **Youth/Former combatants:**

- Abdul Sesay; Abdul Sesay; Abubakar Ibrahim Turay; Abu Jaward; Alex Davis; Alias Be Yourself; Alumamy L. Bangura; Alussane Bangura; Amara K. Momoh; Bockarie Philip - Daddy Boc; Bockarie Sesay; Cisco; Ernest; Fanta; Hannah Banday; IBK & Saidu; Ibrahim Sory Bangura; Idrissa; Jibu Lion; Joseph Kamara - J Black; Junior Musa Sesay; Kalie Conteh; Komrabai; Lahai Jibao; Lamin Kalokoh; Lansana Juana; Mabinty Mansary; Mahmoud Makeni; Musa; Paul Moiwo; Paul Turay; Prefect Abdulai Karuga; Saidu Toronka; Shaqwan; Suliaman Conteh; Suluku.

- **Family members:**

- Umara Koroma; Musa Kamara; Agnes Boima; Patricia Braima; Saidu Bundu

# The excluded

- Former SBU member, current university student whose anxiety rating regarding post-graduation opportunities precluded his participation in the study. [extreme anxiety]
- Female resident of King Jimmy who subsisted by way of a series of very temporary boyfriends. [depressive affect]
- Two “family member” participants who presented as suicidal, with significant food and housing issues. [linked to services]

# Psychological Measures

## **Why used:**

To meet minimal definition of resilience - absence of pathology.

To ensure that only appropriate participants included.

Do No Harm.

Measurable.

Opportunity for cross comparison.

## **How problematic:**

Cultural incongruency, individualistic, “universality,” embedded assumptions, translating concepts, box-check responses, uni-directional

# Sample Questions

*The HAM-A (Hamilton Anxiety Scale).*

“difficulty in falling asleep, broken sleep, unsatisfying sleep and fatigue on waking”

*The CES-D (Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression) scale.*

“Are you lonely?”

“I felt that everything I did was an effort”

“Experienced loss of appetite”

*The PTSD Checklist Civilian version (PCL-C)*

“Avoid activities or situations because they remind you of a stressful experience from the past?”

“Being ‘super alert’ or watchful on guard”

# HAM-A: Anxiety

**HAMILTON ANXIETY SCALE (HAM-A)**

Patient Name \_\_\_\_\_ Today's Date \_\_\_\_\_

The Hamilton Anxiety Scale (HAM-A) is a rating scale developed to quantify the severity of anxiety symptoms. It consists of 18 items, each defined by a series of symptoms. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (not present) to 4 (severe).

0 = Not present to 4 = Severe

Item

<input type="checkbox"/> 1. ANXIOUS MOOD • Worry • Anticipates worst	<input type="checkbox"/> 9. CARDIOVASCULAR SYMPTOMS • Tachycardia • Palpitations • Chest Pain • Sensation of beating heart
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. TENSION • Startles • Crossed legs • Restless • Trembling	<input type="checkbox"/> 10. RESPIRATORY SYMPTOMS • Chest pressure • Choking sensation • Shortness of breath
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. FEAR • Fear of the dark • Fear of strangers • Fear of being alone • Fear of animal	<input type="checkbox"/> 11. GASTROINTESTINAL SYMPTOMS • Dysphagia • Nausea or Vomiting • Constipation • Weight loss • Abdominal fullness
<input type="checkbox"/> 4. INSOMNIA • Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep • Difficulty with Nightmares	<input type="checkbox"/> 12. GENITOURINARY SYMPTOMS • Urinary frequency or urgency • Dyspareunia • Incontinence
<input type="checkbox"/> 5. INTELLECTUAL • Poor concentration • Memory impairment	<input type="checkbox"/> 13. AUTONOMIC SYMPTOMS • Dry Mouth • Flushing • Piloerect • Sweating
<input type="checkbox"/> 6. DEPRESSED MOOD • Decreased interest in activities • Anhedonia • Irritability	<input type="checkbox"/> 14. BEHAVIOR AT INTERVIEW • Fidgets • Stares • Paces
<input type="checkbox"/> 7. SOMATIC COMPLAINTS: MUSCULAR • Muscle aches or pains • Tremor	
<input type="checkbox"/> 8. SOMATIC COMPLAINTS: SENSORY • Tinnitus • Blurred vision	

- Vast majority of participants did not rate
- Sleep issues related to the physical environment
- Moderate tension noted in interviewees who were on break from their work day

# CES-D: Depression

- Examples of cultural incongruence
  - The term “lonely”
  - Item 16: “I enjoy life.”
  - Rephrasing question about appetite
  - Item 7: “I felt that everything I did was an effort.”

Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)

Dep:

Mark a lot of some of the days you may have felt or behaved. Please indicate how often you've felt this way during the past week. Answer for all items.

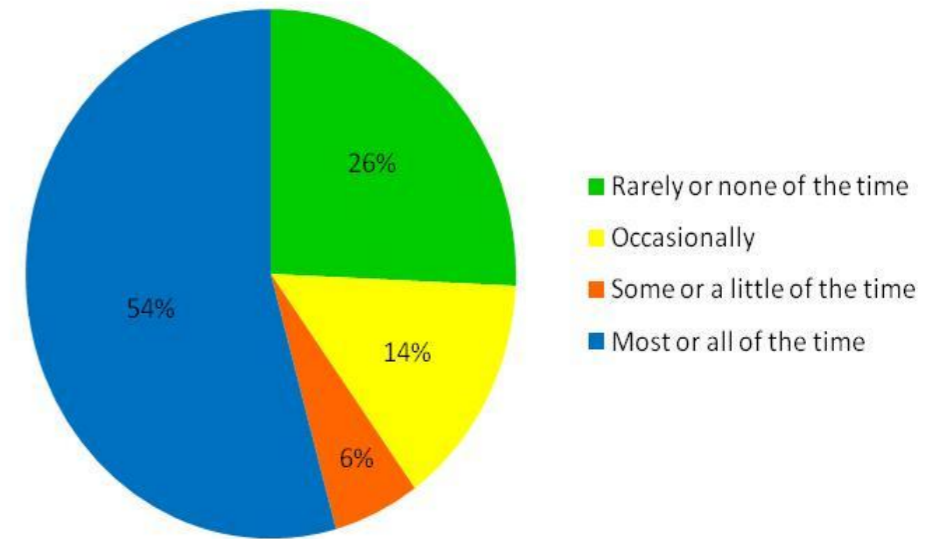
Place a check mark (✓) in the appropriate column.

During the past week...	Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)	Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)	Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-6 days)	All of the time (7 days)
1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.				
2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.				
3. I felt that I could not shake all the blues even with help from my family.				
4. I felt that I was just as good as other people.				
5. I had trouble getting my mind on what I was doing.				
6. I felt depressed.				
7. I felt that everything I did was an effort.				
8. I felt hopeful about the future.				
9. I thought my life had been a failure.				
10. I felt lonely.				
11. My sleep was restless.				
12. I was happy.				
13. I talked less than usual.				
14. I felt lonely.				
15. People were unfriendly.				
16. I enjoyed life.				
17. I had crying spells.				
18. I felt sad.				
19. I felt the people disliked me.				
20. I could not "get going."				

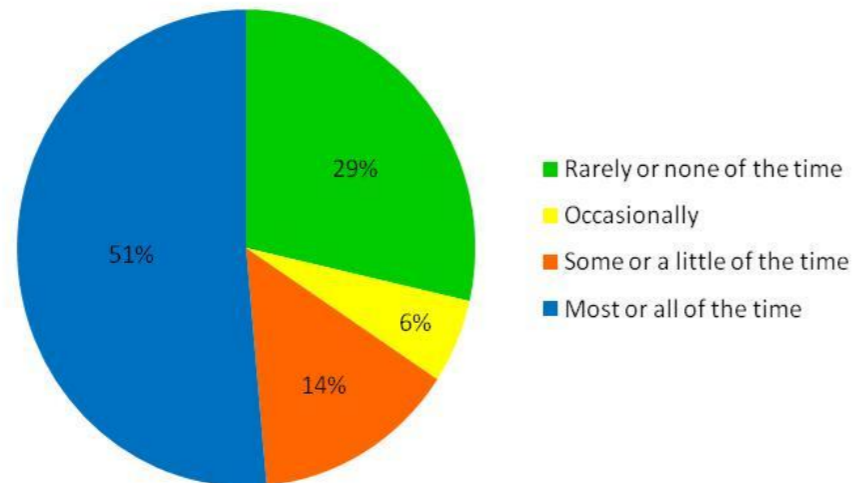
Source: Spitzer, R.L. (1977). The CES-D scale: A self-rated depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement*, 1, 372-82.

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Former Combatants' Responses to Selected Items on CES-D: "I enjoyed life."



Former Combatants' Responses to Selected Items on CES-D: "I am happy."



# PCL-C: PTSD

- Item 7: “Avoid activities or situations because they remind you of a stressful experience from the past?”
- Item 16: “Being ‘super alert’ or watchful on guard”

**PATIENT'S NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions to patient:** Below is a list of symptoms and situations that military personnel have in response to stressful life experiences. Please read each one carefully, put an "X" in the box to indicate how much you have been bothered by that problem in the last month.

No.	Symptom	Not at all (1)	A little bit (2)	Moderately (3)	Quite a bit (4)	Extremely (5)
1.	Repetition, disturbing memories, thoughts, or images of a stressful experience from the past?					
2.	Repetitive, disturbing dreams of a stressful experience from the past?					
3.	Suddenly acting or feeling as if a stressful experience were happening again (as if you were reliving it)?					
4.	Feeling very upset when something reminds you of a stressful experience from the past?					
5.	Having physical reactions (eg, heart pounding, trouble breathing, or sweating) when something reminded you of a stressful experience from the past?					
6.	Avoid thinking about or talking about a stressful experience from the past or avoid having feelings related to it?					
7.	Avoid activities or situations because they remind you of a stressful experience from the past?					
8.	trouble remembering important parts of a stressful experience from the past?					
9.	Loss of interest in things that you used to enjoy?					
10.	Feeling distant or cut off from other people?					
11.	Feeling emotionally numb or being unable to have strong feelings for those close to you?					
12.	Feeling as if your future will somehow be cut short?					
13.	trouble falling or staying asleep?					
14.	Feeling irritable or having angry outbursts?					
15.	Having difficulty concentrating?					
16.	Being "super alert" or watchful on guard?					
17.	Feeling jumpy or easily startled?					

**Total score:**

# Major Findings of the Study

- Resilience: striving, thriving, surviving; re-evaluating indicators and definitions
- Environment: livelihoods; self-organized youth enclaves
- Family of choice vs biological family
- Economic communities of youth -- car wash, hair saloon [sic], Okada riders, etc.
- Role: elder brother, an enduring cultural resource

# Defining “Community”

- Youth enclaves
- Family of choice
- Community network
- Under-recognized and under-researched



# Youth-only communities

Discourse typically framed with youth at the margins of adult-led, municipality-based community structures.

Highly-organized, self-policing, mutual aid, social support networks comprised solely of youth exist.

The benefits of brotherhood, belonging, apprenticeship, collective effort, and joining family of choice is apparent, and may serve as a protective factor.

Prevailing assumption that these are the product of “community” rejection, not that youth themselves reject a return to those settings and demands.

# The social cost of reintegration

- Removed from decision-making (Utas, 2005)
- Return to “the bottom of the social hierarchy” (Shepler, 2005)
- Stripped of moral and political agency (Boyden, 2003; Hart, 2006)
- Relinquish voice as condition of integration
- Loss of social status and prestige (Tefferi, 2003)
- Competencies not recognized
- Social role does not extend beyond household threshold

# Car Wash



Elected officials  
Chairman  
Secretary General

Posted rules

Financial dues

Municipal link (land)

Community  
membership

# King Gimmy

Cooperative business enterprises

Family of choice

Shared resources

Posted rules

Social support



# Hair Saloon

Leadership

Apprenticeship

Engagement

Livelihood

Shared belief system



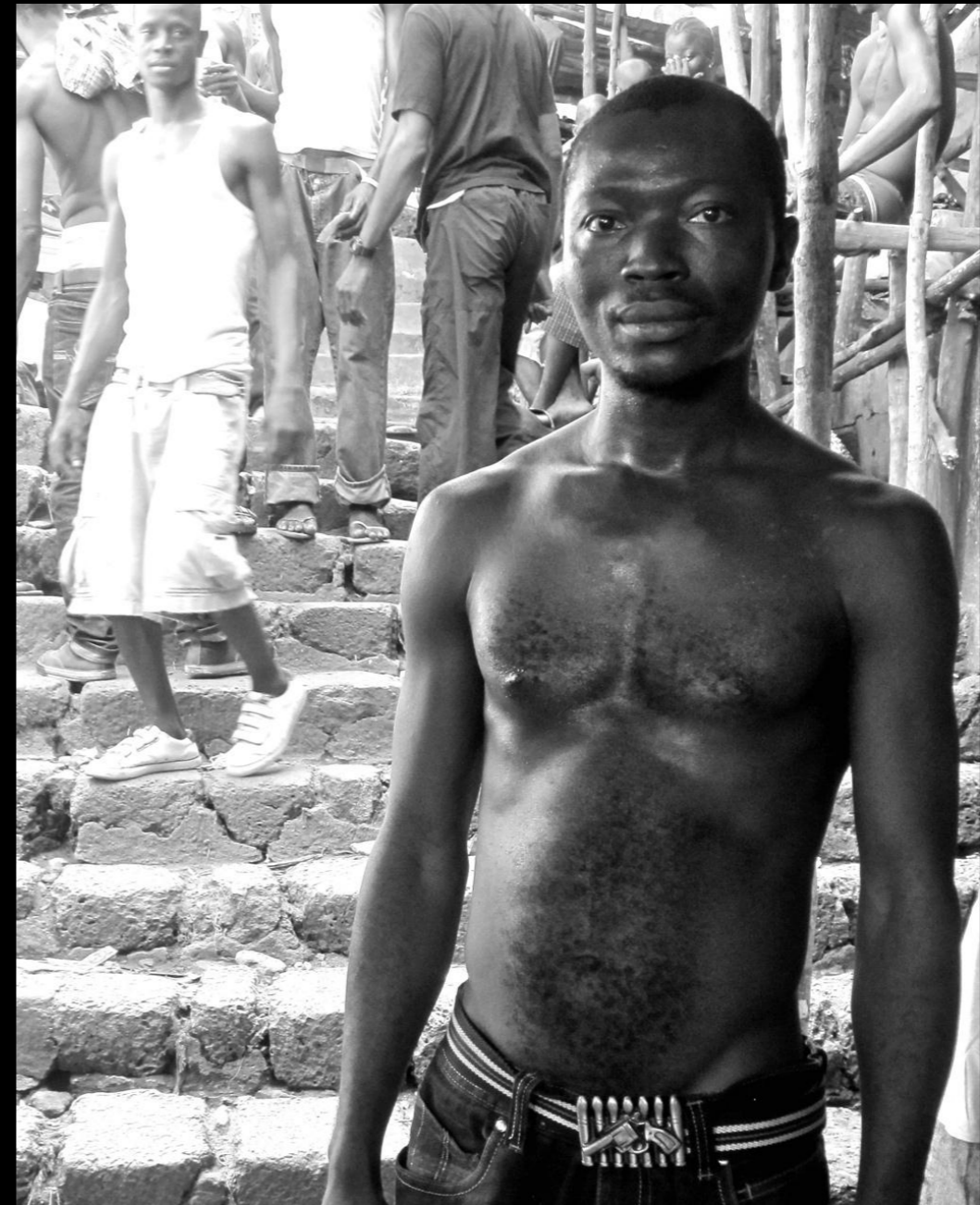
# "Big Boy Pikin": Elder Brothers

Firstborn

Eldest boy (nevermind older sisters)

Eldest of mother's children (polygamy)

Eldest of surviving children



# What does it mean to be an elder brother?

- *Oh it means a lot! If you're an older brother you have to fix a lot of responsibility...They expect much from you. Support. Financially. For the parents. The children. Everything.*

- [Juana, Hill Station]

- *My role in the family as the oldest son is to take care of my siblings. To look after them when our parents are not around. [Now] It has move[d] from that place to a higher responsibility, where I do take care of my younger ones, especially my younger brothers. And to take care of their school expenses.*

- [Komrabai, Freetown]

- *I have a big role to play, never mind I'm a disabled [person], I'm the elder one in family, and now only two of us are alive. Even though I'm a disabled [person], if I have little from anything, I will share with my mother. That is why I tried very hard to become a builder with all my disability, and it is difficult for as a disabled [person], but that is what I do to earn my living. I tried hard to even forced myself to become a builder to be able to handle my family affairs.*

- [Bockarie Philip aka Daddy Bock, Grafton]

# Assets: Being an Elder Brother

Received more family resources (i.e. schooling, parental attention)

Expectations of leadership at the earliest age

Accustom to decision-making and independence

Recognition of status among peers



# Role expectations

- *I am the only man after God that the family is looking up to.*  
[Alimamy L-Bangura, Circular Road]
- *They were expecting me to do something beneficial, not to go on the street like what I have done.*
- [Ibrahim Sory Bangura, Lumley]
- *To support them, they expect me to support to them, but how I can support them when something is not there except my little and nothing I'm dregging at times, and I'm the one to responsible for myself back and then I think of them over there back you see, my burden is high. They are expecting me to support them but when there is no money...*
- [Suliaman Conteh, Lumley]

# Understanding livelihoods.

- *I differ from them because I learnt a trade that will enhance me to take care of my brothers and sisters.*

[Abu Bakar Imbrahim Turay, Makeni]

- *What was really important to me was to learn a trade since I didn't go to school so that I would be in a position to assist my younger ones.*

[Kalie, King Gimmy]

- *In my family most of them learned very well....I learned hair dressing....I learned hairdressing and am having something bit by bit or encouraging. So, I thank God for that. I am doing people's hair. They are paying me bit by bit, so I thank God for that and so am better than they do....I am able to do something for myself. Some are unable to do something for themselves. They just sit down like that. Some are blind. They are not seeing. Some ear have problem. They are not hearing from far no longer. With me am better than they do a little bit because I learned something. I am managing my life and my sister.*

[Fanta, Bo]

# Small Group Exercise

- How would this information alter approaches to the work you do with youth of similar circumstance?
- What are some of the strengths and limitations, obstacles and opportunities in taking a new approach?
- Question three: Let's create this one together before breaking into groups.

# Implications

- Research - shift from trauma to capacity; more inclusive vision of stakeholding groups
- Policy - broad educational funding, not predicated on ex-combatant status; and, youth enclave links to micro-enterprise, not individual (mass) vocational training
- Practice - not individualistic approaches
- Social Work Education - increased participation of social workers in this area; focus on critique of instruments

# Recommendations for future research

- Youth-inclusive research strategies
- Youth members, research teams (Denov, 2008)
- Funding and capacity-building for youth-led NGOs, like AUCAYD, PeaceLinks, and Mind to Change.
- Direct mentoring and microfinance education to youth communities centered around economic enterprises.
- Increased attention to under-researched populations, such as disabled veterans, mothers of combatants, the “naughty” youngsters.

# Thank you!

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There is currently a display of photos from this fieldwork period on display at Busboys & Poets in Hyattsville---all proceeds from the sale of photographs go directly back to Freetown.

A February “artist talk” is also scheduled that will focus on depictions of African youth.