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Quality of Caregiving and the Socialisation of Children Aged 3-5 years from Single and Bi-Parented Homes Faced with Acculturation: A Comparative Study in Yaounde and Mfou, Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand socialisation from an emotional angle: attachment. We wish to better understand the contribution the quality of caregiving brings to the socialisation of children aged 3–5 years. These children come from single-parent and bi-parental homes in the acculturating urban and rural settings of Yaoundé and Mfou, Cameroon. The traditional parental support systems African families had in the past is weakening due to modernisation and the nuclearisation of the African family nowadays. We observed a rise in asocial behaviours while undertaking research aimed at finding tips to improve the socialisation of single parented children. Guided by Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory and Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, a qualitative multiple case-study design was used. Data were gathered through naturalistic and participant observation of forty nursery-school children and semi-structured interviews with their parents or caregivers and teachers, across six research sites spanning urban and rural settings. Most children from both family structures displayed behaviours consistent with the initiative pole of Erikson's third psychosocial stage, indicating adequate socialisation. Positive outcomes were tied not to family structure but to the quality of the caregiver–child relationship (warmth, consistency, responsiveness, and dialogue-based conflict resolution). Difficulties were more frequent among children in single-parent homes (8 of 12) than in two-parent homes (7 of 28), but caregiving quality separated outcomes within both groups: dialogue-based, warm and consistent care was associated with better outcomes, whereas difficulties clustered where caregivers reported being overwhelmed or relied on fear-based control. Five of the six children in extended single-parent homes had difficulties, suggesting that the extended-family buffer can no longer be assumed especially for urban single-parent households. Rural children displayed more spontaneous initiative, while urban children had restricted peer contact and frequent screen exposure. Support for families should therefore target caregiving quality and community socialisation structures rather than family structure as a marker of risk. These findings challenge deficit narratives of single parenthood and position caregiving quality as the operative mechanism of child socialisation in the Cameroonian context.

Keywords

Socialisation, Caregiving quality, Attachment, Acculturation, Single-parent family, Bi-parental family, Erikson, Initiative versus guilt, Cameroon.

Introduction

Socialisation is the process through which a child acquires the values, norms and social roles of the society in which he or she lives. Socialisation is one of the core domains of developmental psychology. Human growth is studied in developmental psychology in three areas: the physical, cognitive and socio-emotional/psychosocial. Socialisation falls under the socio-emotional domain: whose aim is to look at how humans form relationships, build their identity and navigate community rules. It is a lifetime process. Although it continues throughout one's life, it is especially decisive in early childhood, when society is

represented by, and through, the child's parents and the rest of the family. Wallon [1] defined the human being as a biological and social creature, whose success in life, mental health and wellbeing depend on the level of socialisation reached and on the influence of others from the earliest years. Marie-Eve [2] adds that the function of parent-child attachment is to promote social interaction: the quality of the bond a child receives is reflected in the quality of his or her later relationships.

The period from three to five years is a particularly sensitive moment in this process. The child moves from near-total dependence on the parents towards relative autonomy; language develops rapidly, symbolic play and peer relationships appear, and the child begins to understand and follow social rules. In Erikson's psychosocial theory, this is the stage of initiative versus guilt, in which the child either develops a sense of purpose or is dominated by self-doubt. How caregivers manage this period therefore weighs heavily on the child's social future.

In the African setting, this responsibility was traditionally shared. Child-rearing was a community affair, and uncles, aunts, grandparents and elders could stand in for a missing parental figure. Today, modernisation, urbanisation, schooling and the spread of new communication technologies are exposing Cameroonian families to acculturation. The family is nuclearising, community solidarity is weakening, and the African family is described as caught in a permanent tension between traditional values and the solicitations of modernity [3]. Single parenthood is far from marginal in this context: according to the National Institute of Statistics, one household in four in Cameroon is headed by a woman, and Tichit estimates that women head 76% of single-parent homes. Many of these parents now raise their children without the network of relatives that once supported them.

A large part of the literature presents single-parent homes as a risk factor for children's development: lower self-esteem, difficulties in emotional relationships, insecure attachment and antisocial behaviour [4]. Other authors, however, argue that no particular family form is essential to successful parenting, provided the child has at least one consistently responsible adult with whom to build a positive emotional bond [5-7]. Our own observations in nursery schools point in the same direction: some children raised by one parent socialise very well, while some children raised by two parents show signs of asocial behaviour. Family structure alone therefore does not seem to explain the differences observed. This raises the question of whether the difference lies in the structure of the family or in the way it functions, that is, in the quality of the care the child receives.

The objective is to compare how the quality of caregiving contributes to the socialisation of single-parented and bi-parented children aged 3-5 years in a context of acculturation. More specifically, the study seeks to describe the socialisation profiles of these children, to identify the features of caregiving that are associated with positive socialisation, to compare the situation in urban and less urbanised settings, and to propose, from these comparisons, socialisation tips for parents, caregivers and educators.

The study rests on two theoretical pillars: the attachment theory of Bowlby and Ainsworth, which explains how the sensitivity and responsiveness of the caregiver shape the child's security and openness to others, and Erikson's psychosocial theory, whose stage of initiative versus guilt provides the criteria for judging the level of socialisation of children of this age. We adopted a qualitative, multiple case-study design. Data were collected through naturalistic and participative observation of forty nursery-school children, and through semi-structured interviews with their parents or caregivers and their classroom teachers, in six research sites in Yaoundé and Mfou, covering both urban and less urbanised settings.

Bowlby [8] proposed that children are biologically predisposed to form attachments because these bonds enhance survival across vulnerable developmental periods. Of Bowlby's attachment phases, the goal-corrected partnership phase (from roughly thirty-six months into adolescence) is most relevant to the present sample. At this stage, children's improving language and cognition let them understand a caregiver's schedule and tolerate separation, provided they know where the caregiver has gone and when they will return; the relationship becomes a genuine, negotiated partnership rather than a purely protest-based bond [8,9]. Children in this phase who are securely attached typically show only brief distress at separation, accept comfort from others in the caregiver's absence, display self-esteem, seek social support, sustain lasting friendships, and engage readily in play [10]. Ainsworth's [9] reading of Bowlby holds that stable caregiving behavioural systems are what has allowed the species to survive an unusually long period of infant vulnerability. This means that to a certain extent, attachment quality directly modulates a child's developmental risk.

Erikson [11] situated children aged roughly three to six in the initiative-versus-guilt stage, the third of his eight psychosocial stages. Successful resolution toward initiative is marked by engagement in cooperative games, active interaction with peers and adults, leadership in play, and the invention of games; unsuccessful resolution toward guilt is marked by an unhelpful fear of being wrong, a lack of confidence to initiate, a sense of being a nuisance to others, and a persistent expectation of criticism or disapproval. Erikson argued that resolution in either direction depends less on parental status than on the broader quality of the child's relational environment.

Method

The core variables for this research are: caregiving and socialisation which are not easily quantified, coupled with the fact that our study has comparative and exploratory aims, a qualitative multiple case-study design was adopted [12,13]. Cases were organised into four site-based groups spanning an urban–rural axis and a Yaoundé–Mfou axis, allowing systematic comparison across, rather than only within, socialisation ecologies.

Six nursery schools across four zones served as research sites: (a) Yaoundé I, Bastos representing an urbanised, socioeconomically developed neighbourhood; (b) Yaoundé III, Mekoumbou I and II standing for a less urbanised, more recently developed sector of Yaoundé; (c) urban Mfou: École Maternelle Publique de Mfou Centre and Groupe Scolaire Bilingue Godwin de Nkoulou; and (d) rural Mfou: the schools serving Ekid Mekoe and Ngang. Sites were purposively selected to represent a gradient of urbanisation and acculturation within the Centre Region of Cameroon.

Forty children aged 3–5 years (predominantly 4–5, given nursery-school entry-age regulations in Cameroon) took part with their parents or guardians and classroom teacher. As such, we had ten children per zone. Both single-parent (nuclear and extended) and bi-parental (nuclear and extended) family structures were represented at each site, permitting within-site as well as cross-site comparison. Participants were selected purposively via a short sociodemographic questionnaire administered to parents, followed by consent-based enrolment.

Two qualitative techniques were used. Semi-structured interviews, using open questions and revivals, were conducted face-to-face with parents/caregivers and teachers and audio-recorded with consent; children themselves were not interviewed, given that most had not yet achieved full language fluency. Naturalistic and participant observation of the children was carried out at school, using an observation guide targeting age-specific socialisation indicators (arrival behaviour, peer interaction, play, classroom participation). Naturalistic observation captured spontaneous social adaptation, while participant observation allowed cross-checking of information that children might not otherwise volunteer. Through participant observation the researcher engaged directly with the children through songs and games to build rapport/bond talking of rapport we mean a close and harmonious relationship where people understand each other’s feelings or ideas and communicate well).

Data were analysed thematically at the level of the individual case, drawing on interview transcripts and observation notes, and were then compared across cases within each site and across the four site-groups, following the logic of collective, cross-case comparative analysis.

Consent was sought from head teachers, parents, and caregivers before data collection, and the study's aim was disclosed in full. No allusion was made to any particular family form as the societal 'ideal' during work with children; rapport-building activities (songs, games) were used with the whole class, not just the target participants, to avoid stigmatising or singling out any child. Interviews were recorded only with explicit consent.

Results

Across the sample, the proportion of children displaying initiative-pole (well-socialised) behaviour varied by site rather than by family structure alone: 70% at Yaoundé I (Bastos); 40% at Yaoundé III (Mekoumbou); approximately 70% and 67% respectively at the two urban Mfou sites (Mfou Centre and Nkoulou); 75% at Ekid Mekoe (rural); and approximately 70% at Ngang (rural) (Table 1).

Crucially, within every site, both single-parent and bi-parental children appeared on both sides of the socialisation divide. At Bastos, six of seven well-socialised children came from nuclear bi-parental homes, but so did the site's one clearly under-socialised nuclear bi-parental case; conversely, one of three single-parented children at this site socialised well. At Mekoumbou, four of six bi-parental children socialised well against none of four single-parented children. This was the weakest showing for single parenthood in the sample. Meanwhile, at other sites (notably the rural zones, and among specific cases across the sample) single-parented children matched or outperformed bi-parented peers. In each of these positive single-parent cases, parents and teachers independently described the caregiving as warm, consistent, and communicative, whereas the weaker single-parent cases were more often described as extended-family arrangements with reduced parental availability or fear-based discipline.

Seven children came from extended single-parent homes; five of these showed socialisation difficulties, suggesting that the extended-family safety net, while still present, no longer reliably compensates for reduced parental availability. A cross-cutting pattern concerned paternal authority: across nearly all sites, children were reported by both parents and teachers to obey fathers more readily than mothers, even in homes where the Father’s Day-to-day presence was limited by work demands, and even in some single-mother homes where the absent father's authority was described as still shaping the child's behaviour.

Table 1: Socialisation outcomes by research site (N = 40 children, ten per zone).

Research site	Zone	n	% socialised well (initiative pole)
Yaoundé I – Bastos	Urban, developed	10	70%
Yaoundé III – Mekoumbou I & II	Less urban	10	40%
Mfou Centre	Urban Mfou	3	~70%
Nkoulou	Urban Mfou	7	~67%
Ekid Mekoe	Rural Mfou	4	75%
Ngang	Rural Mfou	6	~70%

Acculturation indicators diverged sharply by site. Storytelling and proverb-based education, a traditional socialisation practice, was reported by only six of forty families (15%), concentrated almost entirely in the rural sites; no urban family in the sample reported regular use. Mother-tongue use with children at school was heard only at the less urban and rural sites (Mekoumbou, Ekid Mekoe, Ngang). Twenty-seven children (67.5%) were in regular contact with phones, television, or video games; among these, most still showed good socialisation, indicating that screen exposure alone did not determine outcomes. Though the rural sites, where such contact was markedly rarer, showed some of the strongest spontaneous, self-generated cooperative play (for example, children building toys from sticks and bamboo, or organising their own role-play games).

Discussion

The study's central finding is that: family structure alone is not a reliable predictor of socialisation quality among 3–5-year-olds in this Cameroonian sample. This sits against a body of earlier, largely Western literature that framed single parenthood as intrinsically disadvantageous: the Gale Encyclopedia of Children's Health [14] linked single parenthood to lower educational attainment, higher drop-out risk, and elevated antisocial behaviour, while Akinlabi et al. [4] argued that single parents cannot fully meet a child's psychological and intellectual developmental needs. The present findings instead align with a revisionist literature that treats family structure as a distal rather than proximal cause. Ricciuti [6] found no systematic behavioural or cognitive differences between children of single- and two-parent homes once socioeconomic status was controlled; Bueno [7] concluded that single-parent context influences but does not determine development; and Amato's [15] longitudinal review located the true drivers of poorer outcomes in economic instability, parental stress, and relationship quality rather than structure itself. Several single-parent cases in the present sample illustrate this mediation directly: children rated by both parent and teacher as receiving warm, consistent, and communicative caregiving showed strong socialisation regardless of family form. Weinraub et al. [16] similarly found maternal sensitivity a stronger predictor of child adjustment than the mere absence of a co-parent, and the present data offer partial support for the view that outcomes for single-parented children depend on whether the extended family remains functional: one rural child raised chiefly by a grandmother showed a socialisation profile comparable to or better than nuclear bi-parented peers.

Attachment security as the operative mechanism

Attachment theory offers a coherent account of these findings. Bowlby's [8] notion of the secure base (the affective foundation from which a child ventures into social exploration) together with Ainsworth's [10] typology of attachment styles, maps closely onto the variability observed here: children whose caregivers, by both self-report and teacher corroboration, were consistently responsive, warm, and available showed stronger initiative-pole profiles, greater peer engagement, and fuller classroom participation, regardless of whether that caregiver was a single parent, a co-parent, or a substitute figure. Siegel [17] argued that early secure attachment builds the self-regulatory capacities underlying social competence; the present behavioural data are consistent with this, as children from dialogue-oriented, emotionally warm households sought permission appropriately, took turns in play, showed sympathy toward peers, and initiated cooperative activity, while children from fear-based disciplinary households showed more ambivalent profiles consistent with Ainsworth's [10] insecure-ambivalent pattern and Erikson's guilt pole. That most children in the sample, across both family structures, tilted toward the initiative pole suggests that the majority of caregivers, single or paired, were providing a relational environment sufficiently supportive for prosocial resolution of this stage. Thus, it is consistent with Erikson's [11] own view that stage resolution depends on relational quality rather than parental status itself. Fonagy's [18] mentalisation account, whereby secure attachment underwrites the capacity to read others' mental states, finds further support in specific observed behaviours (spontaneous peer tutoring, comforting a fallen peer, and cooperative turn-giving in play) that presuppose exactly this perspective-taking capacity.

Acculturation and the erosion of the extended-family buffer

A second major finding concerns how acculturation is reshaping the caregiving ecology available to children in this sample. Consistent with Nguimfack et al.'s [3] argument that the traditional African solidarity network historically compensated for a missing parent, the data suggest this compensation can no longer be assumed: five of the seven children in extended single-parent homes showed socialisation difficulties. Applying Berry's [19] acculturation framework, urban families in this sample (particularly at Bastos and Mekoumbou) appear to be moving toward assimilation into a nuclearised, Western-style family model, marked by reduced co-residence with extended kin, restricted neighbourhood interaction, and greater reliance on individual parental capacity. This pattern echoes Mbede's [20] documentation of the progressive individualisation of Beti self-concept and Nguimfack et al.'s [3] linkage of urban Cameroonian family strain to the replacement of communal solidarity by nuclear individualism. Restricted peer contact carried a measurable socialisation cost in this sample: children whose parents actively discouraged neighbourhood play by citing safety, spiritual risk, or moral contamination, showed weaker social-interaction indicators, consistent with Rubin and Chung's [21] cross-cultural finding that parental beliefs about peer interaction predict children's social competence.

The rural sites offered a striking counterpoint. Despite fewer material resources and greater geographic isolation, children at Ekid Mekoe and Ngang showed comparable or stronger spontaneous-initiative behaviour than their urban counterparts. They did so by walking to school collectively, helping teachers, building their own toys, and taking part in cooperative farm and household tasks as an ordinary part of daily life. This is consistent with Rogoff's [22] concept of “guided participation”, whereby integration into meaningful community activity provides a richer socialisation scaffold than formal instruction alone, and with Keller's [23] account of strong prosocial development in subsistence-farming communities. Storytelling and proverb use, nearly absent in urban households in this sample, persisted at low but non-zero levels in the rural sites, suggesting that culturally grounded socialisation practices constitute a protective resource whose further erosion merits attention. A related concern is the rising mediation of urban children's socialisation by screen-based media: several urban caregivers reported children spending substantial time with cartoons, phones, or video games, a pattern consistent with Twenge and Campbell's [24] finding that increased screen time in young children is associated with reduced face-to-face interaction and weaker empathic development which are both foundational to Erikson's initiative-pole profile.

The father's role and paternal substitution

A consistent finding across sites was that children obeyed fathers more readily than mothers, in bi-parental and single-mother homes

alike; children lacking any paternal or male substitute figure more often showed dependence, challenge-avoidance, and limited peer leadership, though this pattern was not universal. At the same time, Silverstein and Auerbach's [5] deconstruction of the 'essential father' thesis (that what matters is the availability of at least one committed, engaged caregiving adult regardless of gender) receives support from cases in the present sample of children raised by a grandmother or a long-term non-parental caregiver, several of whom showed adequate to strong socialisation. Grolnick and Ryan's [25] finding that parental involvement predicts academic motivation and social competence better than family structure or caregiver gender is consistent with this pattern: in the present data, the caregiving relationship's quality, not its structural or biological form, appears to be doing the explanatory work.

Urban–rural comparison

Direct comparison across the six sites shows urban and rural children performing comparably on formal socialisation indicators such as: classroom participation, appropriate permission-seeking, politeness. Rural children show a consistent advantage on indicators of spontaneous initiative: self-generated cooperative play, leadership without adult direction, and creative problem-solving with available materials. Plausible contributors include richer unstructured outdoor time, earlier integration into meaningful household and agricultural labour, more persistent extended-family and community contact, and lower screen-based substitution for human interaction. This was thanks to the fact that, several rural caregivers reported no television, phone, or video-game access at all. Site-level figures reflect a similarly uneven picture: the most urbanised Yaoundé site (Bastos) showed 70% good socialisation versus 40% at the less urban Yaoundé site (Mekoumbou), while the two Mfou zones (urban and rural alike), each showed around 70%, suggesting that acculturation-linked risk is not simply a function of urban residence but of the specific erosion of caregiving and community supports within a given site.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. Firstly, the sample size, sample, though well suited to capturing contextual depth, occasion a limit. The purposive, forty-child case-study limits generalisability, and reliance on parental and teacher consent and availability may have selected for more engaged, cooperative caregivers. The cross-sectional design captures a single developmental moment and cannot establish causal direction between caregiving quality and socialisation; longitudinal designs tracing children from infancy through middle childhood would be needed to test the developmental trajectory implied here, though such designs are logistically and financially demanding in the Sub-Saharan African context. Socialisation was also operationalised primarily through observable behavioural indicators tied to Erikson's initiative-versus-guilt framework; richer assessment of children's internal working models, would allow a more direct test of the attachment-mediation hypothesis advanced here. To better asses these working models, instruments such as the Manchester Child Attachment Story Task [26] or the Attachment Q-Set [27] could be used. Future work should also examine indigenous caregiving practices (storytelling, proverbs, communal ritual, extended kinship) as socialisation resources in their own right, given their near-disappearance in urban households in this sample and their partial survival in rural ones.

Conclusion

These findings caution against treating single-parent status itself as a risk marker for child socialisation, particularly as such households are an increasingly common family form in urban Cameroon; deficit-framed interventions risk stigmatising a common family structure while diverting resources from the factors that actually predict outcomes like caregiving quality, economic stress, and social isolation. A more effective approach would target caregiver–child relationship quality directly, using validated screening tools to identify reduced responsiveness, warmth, or consistency, and offering support regardless of family structure, potentially through partnerships between social-welfare institutions and community health and family organisations. The clear rural advantage in spontaneous-initiative behaviour also argues for urban investment in community-level socialisation structures like cooperative after-school activities, community gardens, mentoring programmes. These activities partially replicate the guided-participation ecology rural children access naturally. Finally, given the consistent role teachers played in identifying, and in some cases compensating for, gaps in children's socialisation, sustained investment in early-childhood teacher training in attachment-informed classroom practice is warranted, so that teachers can serve as partial attachment figures where home caregiving is compromised. The socialisation of children aged 3–5 in Yaoundé and Mfou is shaped not by whether a child is raised by one parent or two, but by the quality of the caregiving relationship in which the child is embedded. That is: its warmth, consistency, responsiveness, and support for the child's initiative. This holds whether caregiving is provided by a biological parent or a committed substitute, and in urban or rural settings alike. At the same time, acculturation is visibly eroding the extended-family and community networks that historically absorbed the challenges of single parenthood, leaving urban single-parent households (increasingly isolated from kin and neighbours and increasingly mediated by screens) facing a socialisation ecology that is, in some respects, thinner than that available to rural children despite greater material resources. This paradox deserves sustained attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners concerned with the wellbeing of Cameroonian children.

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