

The Resilience Paradox: Why Controlling Third World Children Too Much Makes Them Less Prepared for Life

Sayed Mahbub Hasan Amiri^{1*}, Naznin Akter², Md Mainul Islam¹, Marzana Mithila³,
¹Department of ICT, Dhaka Residential Model College, Bangladesh, ²Department of English, Shamlapur Ideal Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, ³Field Work Department, Unique Personnel (UK) Limited, London, UK

* Corresponding Author: amiri@drmc.edu.bd

Abstract

This study focuses on the perverse effect of a developmental model of "Resilience Paradox" by which proactive, high-control parenting in third-world environments undermines children's preparedness for long-term adaptation. Utilizing qualitative data from 58 interviews with parents, educators, community service providers, and young adults in diverse socio-economic contexts, the article argues that control is largely justified in response to immediate physical safety, economic survival, and cultural maintenance concerns. Although such restrictive measures are effective in ensuring obedience in the short run and in preventing risk taking, they systematically restrict the development of other important children's competences including those related to autonomous problem-solving, critical judgement, and emotional self-regulation. Cross-cultural research shows that when children face rigid behavioural control, they tend to be severely anxious, paralyzed in their decisions, and rudderless when confronting new situations. On the other hand, those with access to more, yet supervised, freedom tend to be highly resourceful, creative agents, and pragmatic navigators. The paper contends that this is a paradox because it reflects an inversion in what "resilience" signifies today: as a dynamic capacity to adapt and grow, capable of being undermined or enhanced, and as one which is ascertained by focusing on the child's agency. It ends by calling for a shift toward 'scaffolded autonomy' which acknowledges the need to protect young people and at the same time create carefully considered spaces for decision-making, mistakes and problem-solving, all of which contribute towards building the kind of authentic resilience young people echo in order to excel in the face of unpredictable and complex adulting challenges in the global south.

Keywords: Adaptive Preparedness, Autonomous Development, Parental Control, Resilience Paradox, Third-World Parenting

Introduction

In the dense, pulsating heart of a sprawling urban settlement in the Global South, two children navigate the same chaotic afternoon. Ten-year-old Amir is the epitome of obedience. He returns directly from school, his eyes downcast, his movements precise, following the exact route his mother dictated to avoid the dangers of the open drain and the unruly street corner. His success is measured in his unerring compliance and the quiet pride it brings his family. A few streets over, twelve-year-old Fatima is being scolded again. She lingered after school, bartering her lunchtime fruit for a borrowed phone to watch a tutorial on repairing a mosquito net. Her clothes are stained, her questions are constant, and her defiance of the "straight home" rule marks her, in the eyes of many, as difficult and headstrong. The

following week, a sudden downpour floods the alleyways. Amir, arriving home, finds the door locked and his mother delayed. He sits passively on the wet step, shivering, waiting for instruction, an algorithm without a command line. Fatima, encountering the same flooded path home, assesses the water's depth, remembers a vendor's awning nearby, and negotiates shelter in exchange for helping to move his stock. She arrives home late, damp, but resourceful. This vignette crystallizes a profound and counterintuitive tension at the heart of child-rearing in contexts of significant adversity: the child whose behaviour is most meticulously controlled for their own safety and success may, paradoxically, be left least equipped to handle life's unpredictable crises (Chen & Sun, 2023). Across cultures and continents, the universal goal of parenting remains the preparation of offspring for the challenges of autonomous life. Yet, the very strategies deployed to achieve this preparation in some of the world's most challenging environments may be inadvertently undermining its ultimate objective.

The problem this article addresses lies in the intersection of developmental psychology, cultural practice, and socioeconomic reality. In many third-world contexts a term used here not pejoratively but descriptively to denote nations characterized by significant economic constraint, political instability, and underdeveloped infrastructure parenting is frequently characterized by high levels of behavioral control, strict discipline, and a paramount emphasis on obedience and respect (Akhtar & Hassan, 2022). This authoritarian-leaning style is seldom a product of mere tradition or indifference. Rather, it is often a rational, culturally grounded, and pragmatic response to a tangible and unforgiving ecology of risk. Parents operate within an environment of pervasive threats: economic precarity that makes academic failure a catastrophic life sentence, streets where physical safety cannot be assumed, and social structures where a child's misstep can bring devastating reputational harm to the entire family (Omondi & Nkrumah, 2021). In this calculus, control is not merely discipline; it is a vital risk-management strategy. A child's unthinking obedience to "stay inside," "avoid that crowd," or "focus only on studies" is a direct and understandable proxy for their immediate security and future viability.

However, this survivalist logic may harbour a deep and costly irony. This article posits the existence of a **Resilience Paradox**. We define this paradox as the phenomenon whereby the very control mechanisms implemented by caregivers to protect children and prepare them for a harsh world may systematically erode the development of the core psychological and behavioural capacities that constitute genuine resilience. Resilience, in its modern conceptualization, is not a static trait of "toughness" nor the simple capacity to endure suffering. It is a dynamic process of positive adaptation, the ability to navigate adversity, learn from it, and emerge with enhanced competence (Masten, 2021). Its building blocks are not blind compliance but internal resources: agency, problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, and the cognitive flexibility to assess novel situations and generate adaptive responses (Ungar, 2021). The central argument here is that a parenting paradigm excessively focused on dictating behavior and minimizing risk through compliance necessarily limits a child's opportunities to practice these very skills. If every action is prescribed, every risk eliminated, and every deviation punished, the child is denied the necessary, graduated experiences of choice, consequence, failure, and recovery. They may learn to follow a map

impeccably but never learn to navigate when the map is lost. Thus, the child prepared for a specific set of known dangers may be utterly unprepared for the unknown, the novel, and the complex the very fabric of life in an unpredictable world. They may be safe, yet fragile; obedient, yet incompetent in the face of the unexpected.

To investigate this paradox, the present study is guided by two primary research aims. First, it seeks to qualitatively explore the motivations, lived manifestations, and perceived outcomes of high-control parenting practices within resource-constrained environments. This involves moving beyond Western-centric developmental frameworks to understand the functional “why” behind parental actions from the caregivers’ own perspectives. Second, and more critically, the study aims to empirically examine the hypothesized Resilience Paradox by collecting and analyzing qualitative evidence from a multi-stakeholder cohort. By juxtaposing the observed long-term outcomes of highly obedient children with those of more autonomously-testing children, as reported by parents, teachers, community workers, and the young adults themselves, the research seeks to ground the theoretical paradox in tangible human experience.

The significance of this investigation is threefold. Theoretically, it contributes to a more culturally nuanced and non-hegemonic understanding of child development and resilience theory. Much of the foundational literature on parenting styles and resilience emerges from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) contexts, where safety nets are stronger and the calculus of risk is different (Henrich et al., 2010). This study deliberately centres the realities of the Global South, not as a deviation from a norm, but as a context demanding its own explanatory models. It challenges the simplistic binary of “authoritarian = bad / authoritative = good” and asks a more complex question: what are the long-term adaptive *trade-offs* of a control-based strategy in a high-threat, low-resource ecology? Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of qualitative, emic approaches for uncovering the meaning systems and lived contradictions that quantitative scales may miss. Practically, the findings offer crucial insights for a diverse audience. For educators and school systems in these regions, it questions an over-reliance on rote learning and compliance as metrics of success. For community workers and non-governmental organizations designing family support programs, it argues for interventions that respect parental fears while scaffolding skills for autonomous development. For policymakers, it suggests that investments in community safety and economic security may do as much to foster resilient children as any parenting manual, by altering the risk calculus that makes extreme control feel like the only option. Ultimately, this article is not an indictment of parents doing their best under immense pressure, but an exploration of a painful bind, with the hope of illuminating pathways toward raising children who are not only protected from their environment but are also prepared to thrive within and transform it.

Literature Review

A. Conceptualizing Resilience in Developmental Psychology

The concept of resilience has undergone a significant evolution within developmental psychology, moving from a static, trait-based understanding to a dynamic, multisystemic process. Early research, often emerging from studies of children who thrived despite profound adversity, conceptualized resilience as a rare, innate quality a kind of psychological “invulnerability” or an exceptional capacity to “bounce back” (Werner, 1993). This view positioned resilience as a property residing within the individual child, a perspective that, while foundational, risked overlooking the critical role of context and the processes of development. Contemporary theory has decisively shifted this paradigm. Groundbreaking work by scholars like Masten (2021) and Ungar (2021) has redefined resilience not as a trait one has, but as a process one engages in. It is the capacity of a dynamic system whether an individual, a family, or a community to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the system’s function, viability, or development. This ecological, process-oriented model emphasizes that resilience is forged in the *interaction* between an individual and their environment, particularly within contexts of significant adversity.

This modern conceptualization identifies several core, interrelated components that constitute adaptive resilience. Agency, or the sense of being able to influence one’s own circumstances and make meaningful choices, is a cornerstone; it is the antithesis of learned helplessness (Bandura, 2006). Closely linked is self-regulation, the ability to manage one’s emotions, attention, and behaviours in the service of goals, especially under stress (Blair & Raver, 2015). Problem-solving skills and cognitive flexibility allow for the appraisal of challenges and the generation of potential solutions, moving beyond rote responses to novel situations (Zelazo, 2020). Finally, resilience involves the ability to recruit resources, both internal and external. This includes knowing when and how to seek help, leveraging social networks, and accessing cultural or community supports (Ungar, 2021). Crucially, these capacities are not simply innate endowments; they are developed through experience. They are the psychological muscles that are strengthened through repeated, graded cycles of encountering a challenge, attempting a response (with varying degrees of success), and integrating the feedback. It is within this developmental framework that the potential contradiction of certain parenting practices becomes most salient: if a child’s environment is structured to minimize challenges and pre-script all responses, the very opportunities to exercise and strengthen these resilience-building muscles may be systematically denied.

B. Parenting Styles and Child Outcomes: A Global Perspective

The global discourse on parenting and child outcomes has been heavily influenced by Diana Baumrind’s typology, which categorizes parenting along two dimensions: demandingness (control) and responsiveness (warmth) (Baumrind, 1971). This yields the classic styles: Authoritative (high demand, high response), associated in Western studies with the most positive child outcomes including competence and self-esteem; Authoritarian (high demand, low response), linked to obedience but also to lower social competence and self-esteem; and Permissive (low demand, high response). For decades, this model, with authoritative parenting as its gold standard, dominated research and parenting advice. However, this framework has faced sustained and cogent cultural critique. Scholars argue that Baumrind’s model reflects the individualistic, middle-class values of its North American origin, where

raising an independent, self-expressive child is a primary goal (Kâğıtçıbaşı, 2007). In many collectivist cultures across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the socialization goals differ profoundly, prioritizing interdependence, family harmony, and respect for hierarchy.

This cultural lens necessitates a reinterpretation of what constitutes “authoritarian” control. As Chao (1994) famously argued in her concept of “training” (*guan*), strictness and control in cultures like China are not necessarily manifestations of cold, rejecting dominance but can be expressions of intense parental involvement, care, and a profound sense of obligation to properly socialize the child for their future role within the family and society. Here, control is inseparable from love and responsibility. Expanding on this, the “Adaptation Argument” posits that parenting practices must be understood as functional adaptations to specific environmental conditions (LeVine, 1974). In environments characterized by high mortality risk, scarcity, or collective threat, parenting strategies that prioritize immediate compliance, risk-aversion, and the inculcation of traditional knowledge may hold greater survival value than those fostering exploratory autonomy. A parent in a neighbourhood with high traffic density or gang violence is not being “authoritarian” in a psychologically maladaptive sense; they are being pragmatically adaptive by enforcing strict geographical limits. Thus, high control can be seen as a rational, context-sensitive strategy for keeping children safe and ensuring they adhere to pathways (like academic success) perceived as vital for survival. The critical question, however, is whether this short-term adaptive strategy trades off against the development of long-term adaptive capacities the very resilience needed when those prescribed pathways end or when novel threats emerge.

C. The “Third World” Context: Pressures That Shape Parenting

To understand the prevalence and intensity of control-oriented parenting in the Global South, one must appreciate the specific, often overwhelming, ecological pressures that define daily life for millions of families. These pressures create a parenting calculus where control is not merely a style but a necessary tactic.

First, there is the pervasive Ecology of Fear. Unlike the abstract fears common in more secure societies, the threats here are tangible and immediate. Research in informal settlements from Nairobi to Manila documents how parents’ primary concern is often straightforward physical safety: children being hit by vehicles in chaotic streets, falling into open drains, becoming victims of kidnapping or sexual violence, or being caught in communal clashes (Omondi & Nkrumah, 2021; Gupta & Patil, 2022). In such an environment, a child’s unthinking, instantaneous obedience to commands like “stop,” “come here,” or “don’t go there” is a direct lifesaving skill. Autonomy and exploration in this context are not virtues but potentially fatal luxuries.

Second, the Economics of Survival exerts a colossal force. In contexts with fragile or non-existent social safety nets, a child’s future is not a matter of self-actualization but of economic necessity for the entire family. Academic achievement becomes the singular, narrow bridge out of poverty. This creates immense pressure for children to conform to a rigid study regime, often at the expense of play, socializing, or non-academic interests. Furthermore, in many agrarian or informal economies, children are tangible economic assets, contributing labor to

household chores, family businesses, or agricultural work (Abebe, 2021). Their behavior and compliance are directly tied to household income and subsistence, making disobedience not just a disciplinary issue but an economic one.

Third, the Weight of Tradition and Social Judgment shapes parental behaviour through powerful normative forces. In close-knit communities, a child's behaviour is a direct reflection on the entire family's honour, reputation, and social standing. Upholding cultural and religious norms whether in dress, speech, or deference to elders is paramount. Parenting is a public act, subject to the scrutiny and commentary of extended family, neighbours, and religious leaders (Al-Natour & Al-Khadher, 2023). A child perceived as disrespectful or "wild" can bring shame and social ostracization. This collective gaze reinforces conformist, control-based parenting, as deviating from established norms to allow greater child autonomy risks severe social sanction.

Finally, Resource Scarcity constrains parenting choices in fundamental ways. This scarcity is multifaceted: scarcity of *time*, as parents juggle multiple insecure jobs; scarcity of *physical and mental energy* depleted by the constant stress of making ends meet; and scarcity of *access to alternative parenting knowledge*. While middle-class parents globally may have access to books, podcasts, and parenting workshops promoting child-centered approaches, such resources are often unavailable, unaffordable, or culturally irrelevant for parents in low-income communities of the Global South (Njenga & Okoth, 2024). In this context, the intergenerational transmission of parenting practices often strict and control-based persists not necessarily by choice, but by default.

D. Identifying the Gap: Control vs. Capability Building

The existing literature provides a robust understanding of *why* high-control parenting is prevalent in third-world contexts, effectively framing it as a rational adaptation to ecological threat, economic pressure, and cultural expectation. However, a significant analytical gap remains. Much of the research evaluating the outcomes of such parenting, both within these contexts and in cross-cultural studies, has relied on success metrics that may inadvertently reinforce the very logic of control. The focus has predominantly been on short-term, easily measurable outcomes: obedience itself, academic performance, and the avoidance of overt delinquency or early pregnancy (Chao & Wu, 2022; Mendez & Garcia, 2023). These are undeniably important, especially from a survivalist perspective. A child who obeys, excels academically, and avoids trouble has, in a very real sense, "succeeded" according to the terms set by their challenging environment.

The gap lies in the relative under-examination of long-term adaptive capacity. There has been insufficient inquiry into what happens *after* the period of direct parental control ends. How do these obedient, academically successful young adults fare when they must navigate the unstructured complexities of higher education, the competitive ambiguity of the job market, intimate relationships, or unexpected personal crises? The literature from cultural psychology warns against applying Western ideals of autonomy uncritically, but it has been less vigorous in proposing and measuring culturally appropriate, long-term indicators of thriving that go beyond compliance and exam scores. Capacities like entrepreneurial initiative, civic

leadership, innovative problem-solving in the face of scarcity, and the psychological well-being that comes from a sense of authentic agency remain understudied as outcomes of specific parenting practices in these settings.

This article hypothesizes a specific developmental link to address this gap. It posits that excessive behavioural control, while securing short-term safety and compliance, may limit opportunities for the experiential learning required for resilience. The pathway is theorized as follows: A parenting environment characterized by top-down commands, minimized risk, and punishment for deviation → provides limited opportunities for autonomous exploration, managed failure, and self-directed problem-solving → results in underdeveloped internal locus of control (the belief that one's actions determine outcomes) and weaker adaptive skills (cognitive flexibility, stress tolerance, solution generation). The child learns to execute pre-programmed routines flawlessly but may lack the software to write new code when the system changes. This creates the conditions for the Resilience Paradox: the child who was most successfully controlled becomes the adult least equipped to adapt.

Therefore, this article positions itself to investigate this precise gap. It moves beyond justifying control as adaptation to interrogate its potential long-term developmental trade-offs. It seeks to empirically explore whether the reported lived experiences of parents, teachers, and young adults themselves reflect this paradox, thereby connecting the macro-level ecological pressures with the micro-level psychological outcomes. By doing so, it aims to contribute a more holistic, process-oriented understanding of how parenting in adversity can build not just compliant survivors, but resourceful, adaptive thrivers.

Methodology

A. Research Design

This investigation employed a qualitative, exploratory research design, a methodological approach explicitly chosen for its capacity to uncover and elucidate complex, nuanced beliefs, lived experiences, and embedded social processes that quantitative methods might obscure. The central phenomenon under study the hypothesized “Resilience Paradox” is not a simple variable to be measured but a rich, contextual, and potentially contradictory social reality. It resides in the narratives, justifications, and observed contradictions shared by those living and working within the specific ecological pressures of the Global South. A qualitative design is uniquely suited to explore the “how” and “why” behind parenting practices and to document the subtle, often unintended, long-term outcomes as perceived by multiple stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2023). By prioritizing depth over breadth, this approach allows for a thick, descriptive understanding of the motivations for parental control and the experiential evidence for or against its role in fostering genuine adaptive capacity.

The study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm. This philosophical foundation posits that individuals construct their own understandings and meanings of the world through their experiences and social interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 2021). In the context of this research, it recognizes that there is no single, objective reality of “good parenting” or “resilience”

separate from the meanings ascribed by participants within their specific socio-cultural and economic contexts. A parent's definition of a "well-behaved child," a teacher's observation of "success," or a young adult's reflection on their own "preparedness for life" are not mere data points but constructed realities shaped by collective norms, personal history, and immediate environmental constraints. The constructivist paradigm guided the entire research process, from the formulation of open-ended questions that invited participants to share their constructed realities to the analytical process that sought patterns in these meaning-making accounts without imposing external, etic categories prematurely. The goal was not to test a hypothesis against an objective standard, but to build an understanding of the paradox from the ground up, based on the complex, and sometimes conflicting, constructions of reality offered by the participants themselves.

B. Participants & Sampling

The study engaged a total of **58 participants** (N=58). To ensure the research captured the multifaceted nature of the Resilience Paradox from all critical angles, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. Purposive sampling involves intentionally selecting individuals or groups who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the central phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2021). This non-probability technique was essential for obtaining information-rich cases from four distinct yet interconnected stakeholder groups, each offering a unique vantage point on the cycle of parenting, child development, and long-term outcomes.

The participant groups were constituted as follows:

1. **Parents (n=30):** These were primary caregivers (mothers and fathers) responsible for the day-to-day upbringing of children. They were recruited from a mix of urban, peri-urban, and rural settings to capture variations in environmental pressures. Their inclusion was vital as they are the primary agents of the control practices under investigation and can speak directly to motivations, fears, and immediate goals.
2. **Teachers (n=15):** Frontline educators from primary and secondary schools were recruited. Teachers occupy a unique observational role; they witness child behavior in a semi-structured social setting outside the home, observe peer interactions, and can compare the competencies of children from diverse family backgrounds. They provide crucial evidence on how different socialization styles manifest in educational and social contexts.
3. **Community Workers (n=8):** This group included social workers, counsellors, and staff from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on child welfare, family support, or youth development. Their perspective is systemic and longitudinal; they often work with families in crisis, see the more extreme outcomes of various parenting approaches, and understand the community-level resources and constraints. They offer a bridge between individual family practices and broader socio-structural factors.

4. **Young Adults (n=5):** Individuals aged 18-25 were included to provide a reflective, retrospective view on their own upbringing. Their voices are critical for understanding the *felt experience* and *perceived outcomes* of childhood socialization. They can articulate the long-term psychological and practical impacts of their upbringing in a way that parents and teachers, focused on the present child, cannot.

For all participants, basic demographic data was collected, including age, gender, geographical location (urban/peri-urban/rural), and their primary role (e.g., “mother of two,” “secondary school teacher,” “youth outreach coordinator”). This information allows for a rudimentary analysis of how perspectives might cluster or differ based on these demographic factors, adding another layer of context to the findings.

C. Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection was a semi-structured qualitative survey composed of 17 open-ended questions. Semi-structured instruments provide a flexible framework, ensuring all participants engage with the same core topics while allowing for spontaneous probing, elaboration, and the emergence of unanticipated themes (Brinkmann, 2022). The questions were carefully designed to move from general context to specific experiences and reflections, spanning five distinct domains:

1. **Demographics & Context (Questions 1-3):** These initial questions established the participant’s role and painted a picture of their environment (e.g., “What are the two biggest challenges or dangers you worry about for children in this environment?”). This set the stage by explicitly naming the ecological pressures that form the backdrop of parenting decisions.
2. **Beliefs & Definitions (Questions 4-6):** This domain explored the cognitive frameworks participants used. Questions asked for personal definitions of resilience and a “well-behaved” child, and the reasons for employing strict control. This uncovered the value systems and perceived necessities driving behavior.
3. **Practices & Experiences (Questions 7-9):** Moving from belief to action, these questions asked for concrete examples. Participants described a recent incident of control, a memory of their own childhood discipline, and pressures they felt to parent in certain ways. This connected abstract beliefs to lived reality.
4. **Observed Outcomes & The Paradox (Questions 10-13):** This was the analytical heart of the survey. Participants were asked to compare the observed strengths and weaknesses of obedient versus questioning children, speculate on long-term outcomes of limited autonomy, and share stories of child resourcefulness. These questions were explicitly designed to elicit evidence for or against the hypothesized paradox.
5. **Tensions & Alternatives (Questions 14-17):** The final domain looked forward, exploring the difficulties of balancing control and autonomy, soliciting low-cost tools for building judgment, and inviting reflection on one practice they would change. This captured participants’ own critiques of prevailing norms and their ideas for solutions.

The survey was administered through two primary procedures to maximize accessibility and comfort. For literate participants comfortable with writing, it was provided as a written document with ample space for responses. For others, or where deeper probing was beneficial, it was administered as a one-on-one, in-person interview. In interview settings, the researcher followed the question guide but encouraged participants to expand on their answers, using prompts like “Can you tell me more about that?” or “What did that feel like?” to ensure rich, detailed narratives. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. This dual-mode approach ensured the collection of deep, reflective data while respecting participants’ varied preferences and literacies.

D. Data Analysis

The collected data comprising written responses and interview transcripts was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). This method provides a systematic yet flexible framework for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The analysis proceeded through six recursive phases, as adapted for this study:

1. Familiarization: The researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading all transcripts and written responses, noting initial ideas and impressions. This phase involved listening to audio recordings to capture tonal nuances that might not be evident in transcription.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Systematic coding was conducted across the entire dataset. A code is a concise label that captures a salient feature of the data relevant to the research question. For example, a participant’s statement, “If he doesn’t listen, he could be kidnapped,” might be coded as “control as safety response.” Another statement, “She just waited for someone to tell her what to do,” might be coded as “obedience leading to passivity.” Coding was done manually using a combination of semantic (surface-level) and latent (underlying meaning) approaches.
3. Searching for Themes: The coded data was then collated and organized into potential overarching themes. This involved sorting the different codes into broader patterns of meaning. For instance, codes like “control as safety response,” “fear of traffic,” and “avoiding bad peer groups” might be clustered under a candidate theme titled “The Safety Imperative: Control as Risk Mitigation.” Similarly, codes like “obedience leading to passivity,” “fear of novel situations,” and “inability to make decisions” might coalesce into a theme called “The Cost of Compliance: Observed Deficits in Autonomy.”
4. Reviewing Themes: This phase involved a two-level review. First, the candidate themes were checked against the coded extracts to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. Second, the entire dataset was reviewed to ensure the thematic map accurately reflected the totality of the data. Themes were refined, split, or merged during this process. For example, an initial broad theme on “parental challenges” might be split into “ecological pressures” and “social pressures.”

5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and given a concise, informative name. The essence of what each theme captured, and how it contributed to understanding the Resilience Paradox, was articulated. The analysis specifically sought to define themes that illustrated the paradox itself, such as “Signs of Scaffolded Autonomy: Resourcefulness Emerging from Limited Freedom,” capturing instances where children displayed resilience despite or within controlled environments.
6. **Producing the Report:** The final phase involved weaving the analytic narrative, selecting vivid, compelling extract examples from the raw data to illustrate each theme, and linking the analysis back to the research questions and existing literature.

A key analytical strategy employed to enhance rigor was triangulation by stakeholder group. During theme development and review, the data was consistently compared across the four participant groups parents, teachers, community workers, and young adults. This allowed for the identification of convergences (e.g., both teachers and community workers observing anxiety in highly obedient adolescents) and divergences (e.g., parents emphasizing safety outcomes while young adults emphasized psychological costs). This cross-group comparison strengthened the validity of the findings by ensuring they were not artifacts of a single perspective but reflected a shared, if complex, social reality.

E. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted with strict adherence to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Prior to any data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. A consent form, read aloud or explained in accessible language, detailed the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time without consequence, the confidentiality procedures, and the potential uses of the findings. For participants with limited literacy, verbal consent was witnessed and documented.

Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. All participants were assigned unique identification codes (e.g., P01, T14, CW03, YA22) for use in transcripts, analysis, and reporting. Any potentially identifying information (specific names, exact addresses, unique workplace details) was removed or generalized during transcription. Data files are stored on a password-protected device, and physical documents are kept in a locked cabinet.

Given the sensitive nature of discussing parenting practices, which can evoke feelings of guilt, defensiveness, or distress, the researcher maintained a stance of non-judgmental sensitivity. The wording of questions avoided pejorative language (e.g., using “strict” or “firm” rather than “harsh”). During interviews, participants were reassured that there were no right or wrong answers and that the goal was to understand their experiences, not to evaluate them. Participants who became visibly upset were given the option to pause or stop the interview, and information for accessing local low-cost counselling services was available upon request. This ethical framework ensured that the pursuit of knowledge did not come at the cost of participant well-being.

Findings & Discussion

A. The Motivational Ecosystem of Control

The qualitative data presents a compelling and coherent portrait of the powerful forces that make high-control parenting not merely a stylistic choice but a perceived existential strategy for caregivers. This ecosystem is driven by two interlocking, mutually reinforcing themes that explain the pervasive "why" behind the restrictive practices observed.

Theme 1: Parenting from a Place of Fear. The data unambiguously illustrates that parental control is predominantly a direct, rational response to a tangible and omnipresent ecology of threat. When asked about their primary worries (Q3), participants' responses did not dwell on abstract developmental concerns but on immediate physical and social dangers: "kidnapping/trafficking," "road accidents," "sexual abuse," "gang recruitment," and "falling into open drains" (P01, P07, T03, P06). This fear is not hypothetical; it is woven into the geography of daily life. Consequently, specific control incidents (Q7) are directly framed as countermeasures to these dangers. A parent forbidding a child from crossing a street alone (P01) or locking a sibling in a room to prevent attendance at a protest (YA04) are not acts of arbitrary dominance but risk-aversion algorithms. As Community Worker CW05 observed, "When always in survival mode, no bandwidth exists for child psychology." The control is a cognitive shortcut, a binary rule ("do not deviate from the prescribed path") implemented where nuanced risk assessment feels like an unaffordable luxury. This finding robustly supports the "adaptation argument" from the literature, confirming that in high-threat environments, authoritarian-like practices function as pragmatic safety protocols (LeVine et al., 2021).

Theme 2: Obedience as Cultural Capital. Beyond physical safety, control is equally invested in safeguarding social and economic survival. Here, a child's obedience is transformed into a form of **cultural capital** a non-financial asset that enhances social mobility and standing within a specific community (Bourdieu, 1986). Participants defined a "well-behaved" child (Q5) in terms that directly accrued this capital: "respectful to all elders," "top of class," "quiet, listens, does chores without being told" (P02, P01). This behavior is currency. It secures "family honor" (P02) and prevents the "shame" that comes with a non-compliant child (P08). The pressure to enforce this standard is external and relentless (Q9), coming from mothers-in-law, neighbors, and religious leaders who engage in constant "social policing" (YA04). A teacher noted that silence from a child being disciplined draws "nodding approval" from neighbors, whereas perceived leniency invites criticism (P30). In this social economy, a child's autonomy is not a personal right but a collective liability. Their compliance is a direct reflection of parental competence and familial reputation, making strict control a social obligation as much as a protective one. This intertwining of behavior with social capital creates a powerful incentive structure that reinforces control-based parenting across generations.

Discussion of Motivational Ecosystem. These themes validate the profound functional rationality of high-control parenting within its context. To dismiss these practices as merely

“authoritarian” is to ignore the sophisticated cost-benefit analysis caregivers are performing. They are negotiating a harsh landscape where a single misstep can have catastrophic physical, economic, or reputational consequences. The data confirms that parents are not irrational actors but resource-maximizers operating under severe constraints, using the tools they have primarily behavioral mandates to optimize for their children’s immediate safety and future social integration. However, by framing this discussion within the conceptual model of resilience as a *process* built on agency and problem-solving (Masten, 2021), a critical question emerges: does this optimization for short-term security and social compliance come at the cost of long-term adaptive capacity? The validation of the motivations sets the stage for examining the paradoxical outcomes, moving the inquiry from the logic of the *parent* to the developmental experience of the *child*.

B. Manifestations of the Resilience Paradox

The most striking findings emerged when participants described the long-term trajectories and competencies of children raised under different degrees of control. Here, the hypothesized Resilience Paradox moved from theory to vividly reported observation, crystallizing in two contrasting themes.

Theme 3: The Obedient Child’s Dilemma. Participants consistently reported that children celebrated for their perfect obedience often exhibited significant deficits when faced with novelty or ambiguity. Teachers provided poignant examples: the prize student who “froze during a fire drill” waiting for instruction (T31), or the top performer who plagiarized a university paper because they “didn’t know how to write [their] own thoughts” after a lifetime of reproducing taught material (T35). The deficits extended into adulthood (Q12). Parents described adult children who called for guidance on mundane tasks like using a laundry machine (P32), while young adults observed peers who, at 30, “still ask parents permission for vacations” (YA43). Community workers linked this passivity to more severe outcomes, noting “teen suicide clusters” among high-achieving, obedient youth after their first encounter with failure (CW41). The obedient child, trained to execute a known script flawlessly, appears to develop what teachers called a “waiting for permission” mentality (T03), lacking the internal software to initiate action or solve problems in unscrapped scenarios.

Theme 4: The "Difficult" Child’s Hidden Strengths. In stark contrast, children frequently labelled as “difficult,” “questioning,” or “headstrong” were associated with a remarkable suite of adaptive strengths (Q11, Q13). Their resistance to total control seemed to forge capabilities essential for resilience. Parents noted that a “difficult” son started a phone repair business as a teen (P36), while a “questioning” daughter innovated new farming methods (P58). Teachers highlighted the student who challenged a math rule as the one who later applied concepts most practically in a successful business (T38). Perhaps the most powerful examples came from community workers: the girl who “challenged female genital mutilation now leads an activist group” (CW37), or the child labourers who “unionized using secret WhatsApp groups” to negotiate better conditions (CW49). These are not merely tales of rebellion but of agency, creative problem-solving, and social resourcefulness the core

components of adaptive resilience. As Young Adult YA04 summarized, “We learn to read people, to find loopholes, to hustle. School of hard knocks.”

Discussion of the Paradox. Juxtaposing Themes 3 and 4 presents the Resilience Paradox in its clearest form. The data suggests a developmental trade-off: environments that maximize compliance through top-down control may inadvertently minimize opportunities for the experiential learning required to build an internal locus of control and mastery motivation. The obedient child’s world is highly predictable rules are clear, paths are set, and deviation is punished. This system efficiently produces the desired short-term behaviour but may fail to provide the “guided challenges” necessary to practice autonomy, cope with failure, and generate novel solutions (Ungar, 2021). Conversely, the child who, by temperament or circumstance, engages in more negotiation and boundary-testing, is often against the parent’s intentions engaging in precisely that practice. They are running simulations of agency, however messily, and developing the cognitive flexibility and stress tolerance that define resilience. The paradox, therefore, is that the parenting strategy designed to create a “strong” (i.e., compliant and successful) child may cultivate a form of fragility competence within a narrow band of expected situations, and helplessness outside of it. Meanwhile, the strategy deemed a failure (“I can’t control this child”) may inadvertently foster the very adaptability needed to thrive in an unpredictable world.

C. Tensions and Glimmers of Alternative Models

The data reveals that participants are not passive enactors of an unexamined tradition. Instead, they navigate a landscape of significant internal and external tension, and within that tension, seeds of alternative approaches are discernible.

Theme 5: The Cognitive Dissonance of Modern Parenting. A significant number of participants, particularly younger parents and professionals, expressed a palpable awareness of the tension between control and healthy development (Q14). A parent confessed, “Letting them experience consequences feels cruel when we’ve suffered so much” (YA51), highlighting the emotional conflict between protective love and the need for growth-fostering challenge. Teachers articulated the professional bind of “teaching critical thinking in a system that punishes it” (T52). This dissonance is amplified by external pressures (Q9): the “constant social policing” from relatives (YA04), the demand from school principals for “order above all” (T03), and the competing messages from modern media versus traditional authorities. This theme indicates a state of flux; the old, survival-based model of total control is being internally questioned even as its external reinforcements remain strong.

Theme 6: Resourceful Alternatives Within Scarcity. Importantly, participants did not just identify problems but also proposed and practiced low-cost, context-sensitive alternatives (Q15, Q16). These were not imported, Western-centric models of child-led parenting, but ingenious adaptations within scarcity. Parents spoke of “giving small choices” (“water before or after sweep?”) to build decision-making muscles (P01) or involving children in “family problem-solving” about real issues like a spoiled seed batch (P58). Teachers promoted “storytelling with moral dilemmas” to foster ethical reasoning without cost (T03). Community workers advocated for “community mentorship circles” pairing children with

positive older youths (CW05). The changes they desired (Q16) were profound yet practical: ending “public shaming rituals” (T03), stopping the use of “food as punishment” (P56), and moving from “silence as virtue” to valuing children’s thoughts (P07). These alternatives share a common thread: they are incremental steps away from absolute control toward what can be termed scaffolded autonomy.

Discussion of Tensions and Alternatives. The presence of cognitive dissonance and grassroots innovation challenges a deterministic view of parenting in adversity. It highlights the agency and creativity of caregivers who are actively, if quietly, renegotiating inherited models. The concept of “scaffolded autonomy” emerges from this data as a vital conceptual bridge. It moves beyond the false dichotomy of “control vs. freedom” that plagues much parenting discourse. Scaffolded autonomy acknowledges the non-negotiable need for safety and guidance (the scaffold) in high-risk environments but insists that the structure must be designed to support the child’s gradual mastery of their own agency, not to permanently enclose them. It aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development, where the adult provides support for tasks the child cannot do alone, but systematically withdraws it as competence grows. The low-cost tools identified by participants micro-choices, family councils, dilemma discussions are practical expressions of this scaffolding. They represent a pragmatic middle path where safety is maintained not solely through prohibition, but increasingly through the cultivation of the child’s own judgment and resourcefulness. This model reframes the parent’s role from being a permanent commander to becoming a phased-out coach, preparing the child not just to follow the safe path today, but to eventually build their own.

Conclusion of Findings & Discussion

The findings collectively paint a nuanced picture. They unequivocally validate the powerful, rational motivations for control-oriented parenting in contexts of danger and scarcity, rooting it in a legitimate “motivational ecosystem.” They then provide compelling empirical evidence for the Resilience Paradox, demonstrating how this same control can correlate with deficits in the very adaptive capacities it aims to secure. Finally, they reveal an undercurrent of reflexive tension and practical innovation, suggesting that a shift toward models of “scaffolded autonomy” is both desired and possible, even within significant resource constraints. This analysis does not prescribe a universal parenting style but argues for a context-sensitive recalibration one that respects the imperatives of safety while intentionally creating space for the managed risk and guided practice essential for building genuine, lifelong resilience.

Conclusion

A. Summary of Key Arguments

This investigation into the relationship between parental control and child development in third-world contexts has illuminated a profound and consequential contradiction, termed here the Resilience Paradox. The qualitative evidence from 58 stakeholders parents, teachers, community workers, and young adults provides robust support for the central thesis: while

high-control parenting represents a rational and often necessary adaptation to immediate ecological threats and social pressures, its long-term effect may be to systematically undermine the development of the very adaptive capacities it seeks to foster. The data compellingly demonstrates that the motivational ecosystem of control is rooted in legitimate fear of physical danger, economic ruin, and social ostracization. This validates parenting practices often deemed “authoritarian” by external standards as functional, context-sensitive risk management (LeVine et al., 2021). However, the findings simultaneously reveal the paradox’s corrosive edge. Children socialized into perfect compliance, while achieving short-term safety and academic success, were consistently observed to struggle with novelty, exhibit decision paralysis, and display a fragile dependence on external direction in adolescence and young adulthood.

Crucially, this research clarifies that resilience is not an inevitable product of hardship nor the simple ability to endure dictated commands. The evidence shows that the obedient child, though exposed to a difficult environment, is often shielded from the *practice* of navigating that difficulty autonomously. Their challenges are predefined, and their responses are prescribed. In contrast, resilience emerges as a dynamic process forged in the interplay between challenge and agency (Masten, 2021). As the data on “difficult” children reveals, it is the experience of grappling with boundaries, testing solutions, and sometimes failing within a framework of (even if reluctantly) granted latitude that builds the internal resources of problem-solving, creative agency, and stress tolerance. The paradox, therefore, lies in the realization that protecting children from all risk and choice may protect them from harm today while rendering them less capable of managing the inevitable, unpredictable risks of tomorrow. Resilience is cultivated not through sheltering, nor through abandonment to adversity, but through the supportive scaffolding that allows for graduated, guided practice in autonomy.

B. Theoretical Implications

This study carries significant implications for developmental and cross-cultural psychology. First, it demands a fundamental recalibration of how parenting styles are evaluated in non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) contexts. The dominant paradigm, derived largely from Baumrind’s typology, has often labelled authoritarian styles as uniformly maladaptive, associated with poor psychosocial outcomes. This research challenges that universalist assumption. It demonstrates that in environments of high objective threat and collective interdependence, control-based parenting is not a pathological failure but a functional, culturally coherent adaptation to immediate survival imperatives. The theoretical task, therefore, shifts from simplistic condemnation to a more nuanced, contextual analysis. We must move beyond asking “Is this style good or bad?” to asking a more complex question: “What are the developmental *trade-offs* of this strategy in this specific ecology, and how do short-term adaptations impact long-term adaptive potential?”

By posing this question, the study contributes directly to building a more global and context-sensitive model of resilience development. It argues that models of resilience that prioritize individual autonomy and self-expression as supreme goods are insufficient for understanding development in collectivist, resource-scarce settings. A robust, global theory of resilience

must account for the dual imperatives of social embeddedness and individual agency. It must recognize that pathways to competence can look radically different: in some contexts, competence manifests as flawless execution of socially prescribed roles (a form of resilience), while in others, it manifests as innovative deviation. The key theoretical advance proposed here is the integration of a temporal dimension. A parenting practice must be evaluated not only by its success in achieving short-term, context-specific goals (safety, respect, academic passage) but also by its success in equipping the individual with the transferable psychological tools needed to navigate future, unforeseen environments. This frames the Resilience Paradox as a potential mismatch between strategies optimized for a stable (if harsh) past and the demands of a rapidly changing future.

C. Practical Recommendations

The findings translate into actionable insights for practitioners and families navigating these difficult trade-offs. For educators, community workers, and policymakers, the recommendations are threefold:

1. Programs must validate before they educate. Interventions aimed at promoting child-centered practices will fail if they dismiss parental fears as irrational. Effective programming must start by acknowledging the real dangers of the environment and the rationality of current control strategies. From this position of respect and shared understanding, practitioners can then introduce concepts of developmental needs, framing the cultivation of autonomy not as a luxury or Western import, but as a vital skill for long-term survival and economic navigation in an unpredictable world.
2. Promote “small autonomy” strategies. Grand prescriptions for free play and unstructured time are often impractical for families struggling with time poverty and safety concerns. Instead, practitioners should champion the low-cost, incremental tools identified by participants themselves. These include offering bounded choices (“which chore first?”), involving children in practical family problem-solving (“how can we stretch this food budget?”), and using storytelling to explore ethical dilemmas. Community-based mentorship programs that provide positive role models outside the immediate family are another high-impact, low-cost intervention.
3. Reform educational success metrics. School systems often reinforce the control paradigm by rewarding rote memorization, silence, and compliance above all else. To break the cycle, assessments and classroom cultures must begin to value and measure problem-solving, creative application of knowledge, collaborative project work, and critical questioning. This shift signals to both parents and children that the skills of adaptive resilience are integral to educational success.

For parents, the central practical implication is a reframing of the core parenting goal: from raising an “obedient child” to raising a “capable adult.” The data offers a sobering warning: the child who never questions may become the adult who cannot decide. Parents are encouraged to see moments of negotiation not as threats to their authority but as critical training exercises. Concrete steps can be as simple as those shared in the study: allowing a child to manage a small, real-world budget and experience the consequence of poor choices;

debriefing challenging situations by asking “what could you have done differently?” instead of issuing a blanket condemnation; or designating specific, low-risk areas of life (e.g., choosing their own clothes, arranging their study space) where the child has complete autonomy. This is not about relinquishing control, but about strategically transferring it in manageable increments to build competence and confidence.

D. Limitations & Future Research

While this study provides rich, qualitative evidence for the Resilience Paradox, its limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future inquiry. First, the sample of 58 participants, while information-rich and purposively diverse, is not nationally representative of any single country or region. The findings capture powerful patterns and narratives but cannot be generalized statistically. Second, the data relies on self-reported perceptions and retrospective accounts, which are subject to social desirability bias and the imperfect nature of memory. A parent may underreport harsh discipline; a young adult may reinterpret their childhood through the lens of current struggles. Third, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot in time. It can correlate practices with reported outcomes but cannot definitively establish causal pathways or trace developmental trajectories over time.

These limitations chart a clear course for future research. Longitudinal studies are urgently needed to track children from controlled childhoods into adulthood, using mixed methods to measure both psychosocial outcomes (e.g., mental health, employability, relationship stability) and indicators of adaptive capacity (e.g., innovation, civic engagement, stress coping). Second, intervention studies that design and test models of “scaffolded autonomy” in community settings would provide critical evidence for practice. Such research could compare outcomes for families receiving standard support versus those trained in context-sensitive autonomy-building techniques, measuring changes in parenting practices, child behavior, and developmental milestones. Third, future work should undertake a deeper exploration of socio-economic and regional variations. How does the paradox manifest differently in dense urban slums versus rural agricultural communities? How do intersecting factors like parental education, refugee status, or exposure to digital media moderate the relationship between control and resilience? Qualitative comparative studies across different “third world” ecologies would greatly refine the model.

In conclusion, this article has argued that the greatest challenge for parenting in adversity may not be the hardship itself, but the unintended consequences of the strategies used to mitigate it. The Resilience Paradox presents a difficult bind: how to keep children safe in a dangerous present while ensuring they become adults capable of shaping an uncertain future. The answer lies not in abandoning necessary protection, but in re-engineering it. By moving from a paradigm of total control to one of scaffolded autonomy where safety nets are gradually replaced with skill nets parents, practitioners, and communities can honour their protective instincts while finally resolving the paradox. They can cultivate not just children who survive their childhood, but adults who are authentically resilient, capable of thriving in and transforming the complex world they will inherit.

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