

## Chapter 2

# Intrafamily Violence: A Study on Vulnerability and Resilience

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This chapter aims to present the processes of vulnerability and resilience present in a family in situations of violence. This is a case study carried out with a family living in a risk area of a large city in Brazil, where poverty and crime are present, with a strong influence of drug trafficking in the community. This family participated in the doctoral research on “Resilience and vulnerability in families at risk” (Cecconello, 2003) and was followed up for 4 years along with two other families living in the same risk community. Based on the assumption that the family both influences and is influenced by the context in which it is engaged (Seibel, 2016), this study intends to analyze the risk and protective factors present in this specific family and its impact on the processes of resilience and vulnerability.

Chronic adversities such as poverty, crime, substance abuse, and violence in the community constitute threats to the development of individuals and their families, especially when related to each other, and may increase vulnerability to the occurrence of other risk situations, for example, intrafamily violence (Koller, De Antoni, & Carpena, 2012). In this way, understanding the risk and protective factors related to the dynamics of resilience is important not only for the advance of science, but for the planning of public policies and intervention programs for the promotion of health and development of people (Center of Developing Child, Harvard University, 2016).

The notion of resilience as a dynamic process that can manifest both in the *person* as well as in the *context* has been explored by several authors in Brazilian studies of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological human development theory (Cecconello, 2003; Koller et al., 2012; Seibel & Koller, 2015; Yunes, 2006). From this approach,

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the family microsystem is understood as “the stage of human development, ecological transitions and proximal processes” (Koller et al., 2012, p.156). It is in the family context that people exercise diverse roles in the relationships among their members; they experience feelings and learn behaviors that will later be presented in other situations and evolutionary contexts. The family microsystem is (or should be) the greatest source of security, protective, affection, support, and well-being for the child (Cecconello, De Antoni, & Koller, 2003). However, sometimes it fails to fulfill this important function in its development. In this sense, both families and individuals may or may not go through the process of resilience, but before the adversity, family processes will not always be mediators of the healthy development of their members. And it is this notion that is the construct of family resilience.

Like people, families also develop all the time, facing challenges along the changes they pass through their life cycle. The better the family performance in the evolutionary tasks foreseen at each stage, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes in the development of the child. The child’s resilience depends heavily on the family’s ability to meet their physical and emotional needs during the socialization process: if the family system is stressed, then the child’s adaptive capacity may be affected (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016).

Walsh (2005) defined family resilience as the ability of its members to cope with adverse situations and, in confrontation, to become more united and capable of managing other situations. In her studies, this author identified some key processes that help in the development of resilience, which she organized in three domains: the belief system, organizational patterns, and forms of family communication.

The family belief system influences the members’ perception of adversity, as well as their responses and these events. Such perception affects the social relations of the family and organizes its resources to face the stressor event. Regarding family organization patterns, cohesion, social, and economic resources that the family has, and the presence of a flexible structure, are highlighted as variables that reinforce family resilience. The dimension communication involves the notion that resilience is increased in the family when its members are able to talk about crisis situations and express their feelings, enabling problem-solving in a collaborative way (Walsh, 2012). The analysis of these key processes allows us to understand how the family is structured and how it works, providing insight into the process of resilience.

Cecconello and Koller (2015) defined family resilience based on the bioecological perspective of human development as the family’s ability to cope with the normative and nonnormative transitions of its life cycle, producing among its members, proximal processes that generate competence and nondysfunction. Among the processes that generate competence, we can mention the presence of affection, reciprocity, and balance of power in the interaction between parents and children. Among the processes that generate dysfunction, the presence of violence in family relations stands out (Cecconello & Koller, 2015). Thus, the presence of affection in family relationships can act as a protective factor for resilience; on the other hand, relationships permeated by violence are considered risk factors.

Many of the challenges faced by children arise when their parents are abusive or negligent or when the family is unable to protect their children in situations of perma-

nent stress, such as extreme poverty, health problems, loss, or marital separation. The family has an important role in mediating the stressors faced by the child, which may exacerbate or dampen their experiences in the adversities (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016).

As it can be observed, violence and poverty are potential risk factors for children's development, and the interaction of these risk factors may have an even more significant impact. Poverty, in some situations, can affect the marital relationship, contributing to the increase in the incidence of conflicts between parents, also producing an effect on parents and children interaction, causing intrafamily violence. Although it is not necessarily linked to the condition of poverty, when violence is present in these familiar conditions, it requires that they find internal and external resources to modify this reality (De Antoni, Barone, & Koller, 2006).

A challenge faced by the researchers in this area contemplates the dynamic nature of the phenomena of resilience, vulnerability, risk, and protective, since they are in constant interaction and are many variables that interfere with these processes. In this sense, the bioecological perspective of human development has contributed both as a theoretical reference and as a possible methodological approach for carrying out studies on development in the context. The analysis of the dimensions Process, Person, Context, and Time makes it possible to understand how people perceive and mean their experiences, the influence of their individual characteristics, the context in which they are engaged, and trajectory of the life history of people and families in the past and present (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 1979/1996; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Based on the bioecological theory of human development, Brazilian researchers proposed the operationalization of this model from research experiences in development contexts in the country, designating this method as *Ecological Engagement* (Cecconello & Koller, 2003, 2004, 2016; Prati, Couto, Moura, Poletto, & Koller, 2008). This method allows the engagement of researchers in the ecological context of the research participants and the systematization of the four dimensions of bioecological theory – *Process, Person, Context, and Time*, placing the researchers as main instruments for the observation, selection, analysis, and interpretation of the collected data. This study consists of one of the founding cases of the ecological engagement method.

This chapter is based on the bioecological perspective of human development and uses the method of ecological engagement. Its objective is to analyze the phenomena of family vulnerability and resilience through a case study of a family in a situation of violence carried out through the ecological engagement.

In the systematization of the bioecological model through ecological engagement, the *Process* forms the basis of all research. It is analyzed from the proximal processes that occur through the interaction of researchers, participants, objects, and symbols present in the search environment. The proximal processes were observed in this research from the five criteria described by Bronfenbrenner (1999):

1. For the proximal process to occur, it is necessary that the person be engaged in an activity – in this research, researchers and participants found themselves engaged in the tasks of visits, informal conversations, and formal interviews.

2. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a relatively regular basis, over extended periods of time, and it cannot occur effectively during purely occasional activities – in this study, the visits, the informal conversations, and the interviews were carried out in the participants' house, with their authorization, and they seemed to be always available to engage in these tasks.
3. The activities should be progressively more complex, so the need for a stable period of time – in this research, the informal conversations and the interviews progressed in the subjects to be approached and always took 1 hour or more.
4. For the proximal processes to be effective, there must be reciprocity in interpersonal relationships – in this research, the interaction of the researchers with the participants was the basis of the whole process; thus, the interviews occurred in the form of conversation, and they were always available to respond to participants' questions and provide support when needed.
5. Finally, for reciprocal interaction to occur, objects and symbols present in the immediate environment should stimulate the attention, exploration, manipulation, and imagination of the developing person – in this research, the topics discussed in the informal conversations and the interviews aroused the interest of the participants, since they were related to their life histories (Cecconello, 2003; Cecconello & Koller, 2003, 2004, 2016).

The *Person* involved the physical presence of the researcher and his/her research team in the community and within the family. The environment was perceived and analyzed both from the personal characteristics of each team participant and from the perception of the family, valuing the personal experience of each person within the community.

The *Context* was analyzed through the participation of the research team in some environments and from family reports about them. Particular attention was paid to the family's perception of the environment in which it is engaged, since, according to Bronfenbrenner (), it is necessary to examine the environment as it is perceived and experienced by people, not only as it might exist in objective reality.

The *Time* involved the longitudinal accompaniment of the family within the community, which allowed analyzing changes and continuities occurred throughout its life cycle reported by it and observed by the research team (Cecconello, 2003; Cecconello & Koller, 2003, 2004, 2016).

During the follow-up of this family, several proximal processes happened, both for the participants of the research, who, speaking about their life experiences, have been able to reflect and learn from them, and for the research team, who, when interacting with this family and the community where they live, was able to capture important information to analyze the processes of vulnerability and resilience. These proximal processes, however, were only possible due to the ecological engagement of the research team in the environment in which the family lives, that is, a constant, significant, and stable presence. The team needed to become part of the environment to acquire the status of ecologically engaged in the context of the research (Cecconello, 2003; Cecconello & Koller, 2003, 2004, 2016).

The family case study followed during this research will be described in the sequence. For ethical reasons, the names used are fictitious, in order to preserve the identity of the participants.

## Studying a Case of Vulnerability and Resilience

It is a reconstituted family, in which the central figure, Mary, had two relationships: with Steve, with whom she had her son John, and later with Alan, with whom she had been living for 2 years. At the time, Mary was 37 years old, her companion Alan was 50 years old, and her son John was 11 years old. Mary worked as a day laborer and Alan as a parking valet. Initially, a description of the community in which the family is engaged will be made. Afterward, aspects of the previous history of Mary and its current history will be described.

### *Community Characterization*

The community in which Mary's family is engaged is located in a central district of the city, in a land located between three large avenues of intense flow of vehicles in the center-district access. It is called by its residents as a *village*, in the sense of being composed of a population of superior category to that of village and inferior to that of city (Ferreira, 2014), although it presents characteristics of a slum, in the sense of representing a set of coarse and miserable houses, where poor people live (Ferreira, 2014). Despite being inhabited by poor families, it is located in the middle of residential buildings and commercial establishments of an average socio-economic level. For being a central area, the *village* is well stocked with supermarkets, bars, shops, schools, hospitals, buses, and parking lots.

The village is occupied by more or less 70 families, including Mary's family. It presents a heterogeneous aspect, since the houses, although similar in relation to the size and materials used (in general, masonry and asbestos tiles), are not linearly distributed on the ground. Some houses are glued together, separated by narrow corridors. These corridors advance through the interior of the village irregularly and are not interconnected with all the houses. The layout of the houses in the village does not respect the privacy of the families, because they are positioned very close, invading the space of each other, a fact that predisposes families to get involved in conflicts, hampering the establishment of social support networks.

The community is characterized as a place of risk because it is occupied by poor families, many of whom are involved in drug trafficking and crime, in addition to establishing relations of violence with one another. Mary describes some conflicts with the neighborhood:

Now, lastly, I was beaten up by a neighbor here in front of my house. She fell with a gate and everything on top of me. Her house is tall, here on the side of mine, there is a great window and the children were stoning and breaking my house. And I did not know who it was, but when I found out, I yelled at them: very good, isn't it?! Their mother did not even care for them, she still came here to attack me.

Violence is also present in the school context of children living in the village, a fact that worries families because the school refrains from protective attitudes:

Many mothers do not go to school because of the aggressiveness they have there. There are often attacks on the door of the school, from the students of the village who study at school. Once the vice director said to me, that she cannot get into the fights because then she is threatened in the street, that the college is full of marginal people.

This is the context in which Mary is living now, since her relationship with the first mate. Before, as a child, she lived with her mother in a more remote neighborhood, on the outskirts of the city.

### *Previous History of Mary*

Mary was the only daughter of a couple who had a brief relationship. At the age of four, after the breaking up of her parents, she and her mother moved to the home of a maternal aunt, where she suffered various forms of violence.

My mother left my father to take me to a house, on a 50-meter lot, to make me eat polenta, because there was nothing else, and for me to be a commoner in that courtyard, full of children attacking me. She did not even care, my aunt raised her (children) and watched me, because, after all, there was a child there.

Mary reported: "she was the only girl being raised among many men." Her mother worked in a family home, leaving her daughter in the care of her aunt. She reports being physically and sexually abused by them:

They hit me, you know. They did everything, everything you can think of. I was a punching bag. My teenage cousins, I even masturbated them when I was four. My aunt was married to a guy who manipulated me too. I was raised like this, they just never raped me, but I was touched by them for ten years or so.

In addition to the violence she suffered because of her uncle and cousins, Mary also reported that she was very mistreated by her mother, who "was very rude":

My mother would not slap her, she really beat me. She would detonate me often. My aunt would take me to put my arm in place.

But, according to Mary, her greatest resentment toward her mother was due to her lack of affection and physical contact:

There was no kind of affection or physical contact, she (mother) would not let me touch her. I do not cry anymore when I tell. I would do anything to get close to her, but she would say, 'Do not touch me, I said I do not like being touched'.

Mary stated that the absence of affection, care, and protective on the part of her mother did not reveal the sexual abuse she suffered during her childhood:

I never complained to her (mother) that I was abused. She was very aggressive, I was afraid. (...) If someone touched me sexually I could not tell my mother, for she attacked me.

The experience of abuse and maltreatment within the family was interrupted when Mary turned 10 years when she went to live with her mother at the house of her employer, who had been widowed. Mary lived in this house until she was 17 years old when she met Steve, John's father. They started dating and Mary became pregnant so they moved in together.

### *Current History of Mary*

The relationship between Mary and Steve was also permeated by a lot of violence. Mary reported that John witnessed many scenes of his father's aggression toward her, in which he tried to interfere to defend his mother. Mary recognizes the early responsibility attributed to the son who, at the age of two, acted as if he were the "head of the household":

He could not be a child, he was the head of the house, while his father was there. (...) He had two years and said: 'You, bastard, let my mother goes.' He beat his father. He got tired of seeing his father strangling me and I almost died.

For 5 years, Mary tried to get rid of her partner without success:

At IML they told me that he (Steve) was going to kill me because they attended me every week ... In the female police station, they told me to kill him (Steve). Another place was in the Family Court. I got there and the lawyer told me to leave the house because he was going to kill me. I could not take it anymore. No one does anything. Hitting a woman is normal. He goes to his death and, when he kills, he responds to the lawsuit in freedom.

After many attempts, justice finally interfered and Steve left home, spending 6 years in prison for assault with bodily injury. In Mary's perception, the aggressions of the companion, witnessed by the son, caused problems in the development of John:

John failed in first grade. He could not learn to read. Those father and mother problems, the father invading home, beating his mother and chasing us on the street. In the first grade, I went to the psychiatrist and the two of us to the psychologist because I did not have any conditions.

The relationship between Mary and John, according to her account, was "stressful." Her complaints were in relation to his behavior. According to her, "John was very disconnected, needy and infantilized." Mary was very disappointed in her son's upbringing, comparing his behavior with her own behavior in childhood, when she was "an extremely intelligent and obedient child," feeling frustrated.

Mary reported that she often lost her patience, physically and psychologically assaulting her son. She perceived herself as a very "nervous, impatient and radical" person, thus justifying her attitudes toward John:

... I think I have a duty to beat him (John) to educate him. I do this often. Sometimes it's a slap, but sometimes I get it hard and I really hit him. (...) When he (John) disobeys, I rage, I call him everything you can imagine. When I am possessed, I tell horrors to him.

In addition to verbal and physical violence, Mary claimed that she could not show affection for her son, justifying her attitude toward John's bad behavior and also because she had not received affection in her childhood:

My biggest problem is affection. But I cannot see someone bothering and give affection. He (John) is a child without affection because I am like this with a child, I was raised like this without caring.

However, in spite of the abuses, Mary showed a concern with her son's education, which led her to use educational practices that allowed the learning of rules and the internalization of limits, such as the use of explanations during the dialogue with the child:

I'm picky about what he can do. I also give a lot of explanation. Often, when I was little, my mother was radical, she explained nothing. Because of that, I explain a lot to him.

In addition to the use of educational practices that made moral internalization possible, Mary also demonstrated protective attitudes toward her son, due to the risk in the community:

Here the street is full of marginal, they run into everybody, but they smell and smoke drugs. There are people who think I hold John very hard, but here the environment does not work, it does not have conditions. If I like him, it has to be this way. It's not possible if you deviate a little, your son is smelling loló.

The union of Mary with her new companion Alan, sometimes after the separation of the father of John, contributed so that she rethought its relation with the son since it happened to feel more calm and calm:

He (Alan) draws my attention so I do not take a drastic attitude. It interferes and calms me down. Once I slapped John and he did not like it, he called my attention.

Similarly, Mary also realized that the arrival of Alan was important for the development of John, who came to have a close relationship with the stepfather, with him actively participating in his education:

John is very attached to Alan because now he (stepfather) is doing this role, his father. He guides, gives limits, sits and talks, things I cannot do when I'm angry.

## Understanding Vulnerability and Resilience

The ecological engagement of the research team in the community in which Mary's family lived and the analysis of the proximal processes in the relations between the family members allowed observing the presence of risk and protective factors, reflecting on the processes of vulnerability and resilience, both in the individual domain (dimension *person*) and in the family domain (dimension *context*).

The presence of abuse mistreatment in the relationship between Mary and John seems to be a manifestation of vulnerability, demonstrating the fragility of the family microsystem in fulfilling its role. However, this situation of violence is gradually



changing with the arrival of Alan in the family, contributing to the change in Mary's attitude, who comes to realize the support provided by the companion, signaling a sign of resilience. The risk and protective factors that contributed to the processes of vulnerability and resilience will be analyzed below from the *Process, Person, Context, and Time* dimensions of the bioecological model.

## ***Risk Factors***

Risk factors are related to variables that have the potential to cause specific problems or negative development results (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), the incidence of developmental problems is an aspect that depends both on family vulnerability and on the context in which families are engaged, being, therefore, an individual as well as ecological effect. This author also emphasizes that the community seems to play a more influential role for high-risk families than for low-risk families.

Thus, in relation to the dimension context, it is possible to affirm that the existing level of risk in the community at the exosystem level, observed from the presence of violence in interpersonal relations, crime, and drug trafficking, seems to have contributed to the social isolation of the Mary's family in relation to other families in the community. Garbarino and Barry (1997) explained the concept of community as an ecological niche in which families live, being one of the main environments where living conditions can influence its functioning, both positively and negatively. In this sense, the social isolation of Mary's family seems to have contributed to the incidence of violence in the relationships established in this context, both in the relationship between Mary and her first partner as in her relationship with her son John. According to Garbarino and Barry (1997), the social isolation of families is the price paid for their privacy in relation to society, because although parenting is a role played in the family microsystem, it is also a social function, since parents or caregivers need information about the development and educational practices. The privacy of families in relation to the services that could play this guiding role contributes to the fact that, at the moment when there are distortions in the parental functions, they are difficult to reach public knowledge. This is what seems to have happened to the family of Mary.

The relationship of abuse present in the proximal processes between Mary and John manifested itself in the physical and emotional forms. Often, there is an overlapping of various forms of abuse, and physical abuse is often accompanied by emotional abuse (Farinatti, Biazus, & Leite, 1993). Physical abuse may be manifested through the use of actual or threatened physical force by the caregiver against the child and adolescent (Ceconello et al., 2003). Emotional abuse can be manifested through various forms, including humiliation, degradation, isolation, terrorism, corruption, exploitation, and verbal aggression (De Antoni & Koller, 2012). However, denial of affection and parental rejection are considered to be the most maleficent forms of emotional abuse, hampering the development of social

competence, self-esteem, and other important skills (Garbarino & Eckenrode, 1997). The physical abuse of Mary's relationship with her child was manifested through coercive educational practices in which Mary frequently used physical force to correct her child's behavior. Emotional abuse is manifested through verbal offenses, in the moments when John disobeyed, and in the deprivation of affection, due to Mary's difficulty in expressing affection to her son.

The abusive relationship resulting from the proximal processes established between Mary and her son suggests the presence of problems in the bond between them. Mayer and Koller (2012) affirmed that the parents' lack of care for the child indicates that, implicitly, there is a bad bond between both. Thus, problems in the attachment relationship between mother and child may be considered risk factors for intrafamily violence. Mary's difficulty in showing affection to her son suggested that there were problems in her attachment to him, in which Mary did not feel capable of satisfying his needs, not tolerating his problems and difficulties, thus maintaining an abusive relationship with him.

In addition, marital violence resulting from the proximate processes between Mary and John's father may also have contributed to the onset of maltreatment, as it is commonly associated with child abuse (Bolger, Thomas, & Eckenrode, 1997). Violence against women is a social and public health problem, consisting of a worldwide phenomenon that does not respect social class, race/ethnicity, religion, age, and schooling. Marital violence can be defined as any kind of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse perpetrated by one partner against another in a past or current intimate relationship (Werlang, Sá, & Borges, 2009). This form of violence was present in Mary's relationship with Steve, contributing to the mother's abusive reaction to her son.

In relation to the dimension *person*, the characteristics of the child and the parents also contribute to the proximal processes between both and may lead to intrafamilial violence. Ceconello et al. (2003) mentioned impulsiveness, aggressiveness, and the presence of mood disorders as factors that can lead to maltreatment. This difficulty was presented by Mary, contributing to the incidence of violence: "I'm annoyed, I'm nervous, anything overflows. I have this in me. I do not have much patience. I hate this. I try to control myself but I am radical." This characteristic contributed to Mary not tolerating certain behaviors of the son, such as dispersion, inattention, and childishness.

Likewise, John's behavior in relation to his mother's attitudes showed a challenging and provocative behavior, as reported by Alan: "... he really provokes, he does the wrong things and he seems that he knows that it is wrong and it does the same...." Such behavior generated maternal irritation, often leading to maltreatment. According to Belsky (1993), the child's behavior can act as an elicitor of abuse. There is evidence that abused children exhibit more maladaptive behaviors than unabused children. However, the author affirms that there is still a lack of definition as to whether it is maltreatment that causes misconduct or whether it is the one that elicits abuse.

Still, in relation to the context, Mary's belief in the effectiveness of coercive discipline as an educational practice is observed at the macrosystem level, according to her account: "I think I have a duty to beat him (John) to educate...." According

to Cecconello et al. (2003), the cultural acceptance of corporal punishment, as a disciplinary strategy, constitutes a risk factor for physical abuse. The use of physical force against children and adolescents demonstrates a belief in authoritarian values, being justified by the aggressor as a disciplinary practice (De Antoni & Koller, 2012). The presence of physical abuse in Mary's relationship with her son seemed to be the result of her high expectations for John's behavior, his low tolerance for disobedience, and her belief in the effectiveness of coercive discipline, that, in moments of decontrol, elevated the tension between them, causing maltreatment.

Regarding the dimension time, Mary mentioned the presence of maltreatment during her childhood, evidenced by physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect. Her mother was the main aggressor, physically abusing her daughter through beatings and physical punishment. Emotional abuse was manifested through deprivation of affection and excessive control over the daughter's behavior, not allowing her to have appropriate attitudes to her developmental phase, such as playing and chatting.

Physical and sexual abuses were also brought by Mary's cousins and uncles, and the latter, Mary failed to reveal to her mother at the time. According to Hohendorff and Habigzang (2014), sexual violence, among the different forms of violence practiced by the human being, seems to be the most difficult to be revealed. Its dynamics may be one of the factors that contribute to the abuse being revealed generally in adolescence when the victim can identify that the relationship with the aggressor is abusive. Thereafter, the aggressor tends to intimidate her through physical and psychological violence, as well as bargaining and threats to keep sexual violence secret (Hohendorff & Habigzang, 2014).

The neglect was evident in Mary's childhood, through the absence of care received, adequate food, and perceived protective. Negligence, according to Maciel and Cruz (2009), generates a diversity of losses for the child and can lead to evolutionary sequelae due to restrictions of developmental conditions, psychic morbidity, and even infant mortality. Mary's reaction to the maltreatment showed a self-destructive behavior, understood by her as an attempt to commit suicide: "You know what I did? I had some stones, when I was very small, I would throw myself at them. I was killing myself, bursting into the rocks. My milk teeth were all broken; I think it was a suicidal way."

The presence of violence in Mary's childhood and the repetition of some of these forms in her relationship with the child demonstrate the influence of a phenomenon related to the dimension time, called multigenerationality. Santos, Pelisoli, and Dell'Aglío (2012) define this phenomenon as the repetition of patterns of behavior learned through generations.

Mary revives with her son much of the violence experienced in her childhood through physical and emotional abuse, reproducing the cycle of violence. According to Bolger et al. (1997), parents who did not have their needs fulfilled as children may become unable to meet the needs of their own children. In the same way, parents who had been mistreated in their childhood may repeat such experiences with their children. Thus, the intergenerational repetition of the cycle of violence with John indicated that Mary had not overcome such negative experiences.

## ***Protective Factors***

Protective factors are related to variables or conditions that contribute to positive developmental outcomes despite the influence of risk or adversity (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). Among the factors that contributed to the improvement of the proximal processes between Mary and John, the separation between Mary and Steve, which caused the interruption of conjugal violence, and the arrival of Alan in the family microsystem, leading to a decrease in the abuses committed by the mother on her son from the support provided during parenting, were noticed.

Despite the divorce is considered a nonnormative family transition, although it is present in 30–50% of couples in the last decade, Falceto and Waldemar (2013) warned that family reactions to this event depend heavily on the ability of its members to cope with tension. In a special way, in cases where there were much violence and family conflict, the sensation may even be of relief. Thus, because it contributed to the interruption of intrafamily violence, the rupture of the relationship began to play a protective role for the family, allowing the reestablishment of this microsystem.

Likewise, Mary's perceived support for the new companion also contributed to the improvement of the proximal processes between Mary and John. Social support is considered a function of social networks and consists of the feeling that one has to be loved, cared for, and valued by others with whom one lives (Seibel, 2016). By maintaining a stable relationship with a partner in adult life, which provides support and emotional well-being, the mother contributes to competently playing her role in raising children, acting as a protective factor for abuse and maltreatment (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988).

Alan's support for Mary was manifested through instrumental and emotional forms. According to Mary's accounts, Alan interacted both directly in educational practices, appeasing the conflicts between mother and child (instrumental support), and indirectly, reassuring the partner in the moments when she was nervous (emotional support). Both forms of support were highlighted by Mary as important for her relationship with John and for his psychological well-being.

Still, in relation to the dimension context, the support obtained by Mary in the services provided in the mesosystem also had a protective function. Mary mentioned that when she encountered difficulties and/or had doubts about John's education, she sought help from health professionals at the health center where she received care, such as psychologists and psychiatrists: "When I have some questions I look for the psychologist since he was six years (John). For six years we have had contact with the psychologist since I separated from his father, and I look for Angela (therapist), both for me and for John." This type of support perceived by Mary of the psychosocial care network can be considered social support.

In addition to the changes that directly affected the dynamics of the family microsystem, reducing violence situations, some factors related to the dimensions process and person also seem to have contributed to the presence of resilience in

relation to some aspects. Analyzing the influence of Mary's experience on her family of origin, it is possible to observe some aspects that were not present in Mary's relationship with the mother in the childhood that she sought to put into practice in her relationship with the child, such as the use of inductive educational practices, such as dialogue and explanation, and protective because of the risk in the community. The nonrepetition of negative experiences lived in childhood, according to Belsky (1984), may be the result of a compensatory process, through which parents who have not had happy experiences can motivate themselves to be the parents they would like to have had in their childhood. Thus, it is observed that in some aspects of education, Mary seemed to overcome past experiences, demonstrating the motivation to act differently with the child.

In addition, Mary demonstrated that she understood her childhood education as one of the aspects that contributed to her becoming a "strong and independent person," suggesting that she would overcome negative experiences. The ability to overcome the negative experiences of childhood may be related to the presence of mediating factors, such as child resilience (Egeland et al., 1988; Muller, Goebel-Fabbri, Diamond, & Dinklage, 2000).

## Take-Home Message

The bioecological analysis of the Mary family case study made it possible to identify several risk and protective factors related to the dimensions process, person, context, and time that contributed to the processes of resilience and vulnerability, provided by the ecological engagement in the community in which it was engaged. This study approaches the Bronfenbrenner and Evans proposal, which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, mentioned the great scientific challenge that would be "to develop adequate research designs to investigate the effects of the chaos currently experienced by societies and to identify factors that can minimize their effects" (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p.121). According to the authors, chaos refers to a significant increase in the risk factors present in families and in society as a whole, such as violence and poverty, which interfere with the development and adaptation of people, producing negative effects on their proximal processes.

In this sense, it is worth highlighting the power of the method used in this study – ecological engagement, considered an innovation in bioecological research on development-in-context in Brazil. Despite the great theoretical contributions of the bioecological model for the study of human development and the reflections proposed from the concept of ecological validity in research, the focus of the work of Bronfenbrenner was not the design of research methods for scientific investigations in the area of development. Thus, especially due to the social and economic diversity that the country presents, the method of ecological engagement allows analyzing the influence of conditions such as poverty and very often associated with it,

violence, about the proximal processes that lead to resilience and vulnerability in families in these situations.

In addition to the scientific knowledge provided by studies such as this one, with families living at risk, it is necessary to emphasize their importance for the development of public policies in the area of health, education, and social assistance, supporting the proposal of bioecological theory. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979/1996), a bioecological approach to the study of human development requires a reorientation of the conventional view of the proper relationship between science and public policy. The traditional position is that social policy, where possible, should be based on scientific knowledge. The bioecological line of thought leads to a contrary thesis: for the evolution of the research in development, basic science must be based on public policy, even more than public policy should be based on basic science, because it is necessary to identify the aspects of the macrosystem that interfere with the development of individuals and their families, such as social, economic, and cultural issues (Bronfenbrenner, 1979/1996).

In this regard, Ungar (2016) stated that a suitable model for the planning of interventions in communities of risk results from a combination of the assessment of the risk in the environment and the individual predisposition to react to it. However, this author argues that in high-risk settings, public policies, community resources, and interventions in the environment play a more significant role in producing positive outcomes than individual resources. In this perspective, the Health Promotion National Policy, launched by the Brazilian Ministry of Health in 2006, highlights the importance of the psychosocial care network in promoting the resilience of children, adolescents, and their families, based on the strengthening of factors that protect the person, helping it to avoid or control the risks to which it is subject (Ministry of Health, 2010).

According to this policy, the promotion of resilience is based, among many factors, on the strengthening of strong affective bonds and the good functioning of the network of relationships, which act as a support for the person to reflect on his life and find the strength to overcome. Thus, the importance of the health professionals' role, through a sensitive, empathic, and welcoming listening, can help the person to seek alternatives to overcome the problems experienced. Attitudes such as listening to what people have to say about problems experienced and encouraging the expression of feelings of sadness, anger, and fear, for example, can provide the support needed to make these people feel secure. In addition, encouraging initiatives to create outputs and finding solutions to the problems faced can contribute to the resilience (Ministry of Health, 2010). This seems to be a possible path for the change in the course of families' development living in communities of risk in Brazil, such as the one described in this chapter. However, we are still far short of what would be expected in terms of the implementing public policies and the development of social programs. Although we have advanced in scientific knowledge with studies on the processes of resilience and vulnerability, the great challenge lies in the elaboration of policies that allow strategies to prevent violence and promote health in families living at risk in Brazil.



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