

Abuse and resilience

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Summary

Abuse and resilience are linked, by definition. A person is resilient to the extent that he or she has experienced a high-risk situation and has been intentionally abused by another person, group or institution.

In this text, the supposed effects of *extreme situations* in which the subject was or is confronted with death are analysed. The various types of abuse (in particular psychological abuse associated with narcissistic perversion) and the various *strategies of the survivor-abused* in critical or transitional situations are then discussed. Using metaphors borrowed from physics, the psychological characteristics of resilience are presented (holding on, bouncing back, being capable of adaptive flexibility, etc.) and their links with coping, attachment, risks and internal and external protection.

Using the example of Wolin and Wolin's 7 resiliencies model, the essential dimensions of this process are presented. Finally, the author shows the limits of the concept of resilience, which is too intrapersonal, and the need to take into consideration the identification processes, the nature of the relationships and the situations experienced and, finally, the importance of not underestimating the traces of the trauma and their possible emergence, in terms of acting out or repetition.

Keywords: abuse, resilience, narcissistic perversion, transition, *ego resiliency*, risks, protections, coping.

Abuse and resilience

Pierre Tap¹

Abuse in all its forms is not new, but efforts to detect and reduce it are constantly bringing it to the forefront of the media and the courts. Abuse encompasses all forms of child maltreatment that result from intentional, reprehensible human action in the immediate environment that can be prevented. Abuse includes physical violence (assault and battery), sexual abuse (rape, molestation, video exploitation, pornography, prostitution), psychological cruelty (humiliation, threats, isolation) and gross neglect (failure to care). These abuses often concern children, the elderly and the disabled, but can also affect anyone living in a couple, family or institution.

All of these abuses usually have serious consequences for a person's physical, mental and social development. But research on *resilience* shows that some people appear to be less vulnerable to abuse than others.

The notion of *resilience* has now become very fashionable, both in France and in Portugal. It is all the more important to question it in relation to the realities it is supposed to explain. To say that a person is 'resilient' or that you yourself are resilient, without specifying what this word can mean and without asking questions about how this personal dimension can be measured and analysed in practice, is ultimately to assume the existence of a gift, a more or less magical, innate force, which would prevent the person from suffering the troubles and suffering that others endure in the same situation.

Let us turn, then, to the meaning generally given to the term 'resilience'. To say that a child, for example, is resilient implies first of all his or her ability to resist 'abuse' from people or circumstances.

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Resilience: surviving an extreme situation.

Indeed, to consider that a child is resilient implies first and foremost that he or she has experienced an extreme situation, an event with a high risk of dysfunction, an 'abuse' causing high stress and having generally disruptive effects.

It is therefore important, from the outset, to specify what is meant by an *extreme situation*. Bruno Bettelheim, an American psychoanalyst, was responsible for one of the first analyses of the psychological effects of an extreme situation. In 1943, he published an article entitled *Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations*, which begins with the following information: "The author spent approximately one year, spanning 1938-1939, in the two largest German concentration camps for political prisoners, Dachau and Buchenwald". This article was later included in his book *Surviving and other essays* (1st edition, 1952), translated into French in 1979 under the title "*Survivre*. The peace that reigns in a totalitarian society is bought at the price of the death of the soul". According to Bettelheim, 'We find ourselves in an extreme situation when we are suddenly catapulted into a set of living conditions where our old values and coping mechanisms no longer function and some of them even endanger the very life they were meant to protect' (*op. cit.* , 24). In psychosocial terms, the extreme situation is not only defined as 'external', the subject is fundamentally involved. "The sudden and simultaneous collapse of all (our) defences against death anxiety precipitates us into what I have called, for want of a better term, an extreme situation' (*ibid.*). The resilient would therefore be the one who has survived the extreme situation. According to Bettelheim, *survival* implies two distinct and yet very associated times:

- the *original trauma* associated with an extreme regime of terrorism and which at the time causes the degradation of the personality, the destruction of the previous social life by deprivation of support;
- the *subsequent effects*, in terms of *vulnerability*, on the *whole life* of the person.

But how to live with an *existential difficulty that has no solution*? How can integration (inner, psychic) be maintained in the face of the effects of the old disintegration? Bettelheim quotes a reader who wrote to him: 'Many times in my life I have felt that there are *problems that* cannot be solved, but *with which one must live*' (*op. cit.*, 41). The survivor asks 'why was I spared', 'why me'. It is difficult to talk about one's own skills or characteristics ... so? luck? but guilt sets in (if I survived it is because I took the place of someone else who died in my place). For example, in Benigni's concentration camp film *Life is Beautiful*, the father manages to hide his son (who survives), before being eliminated himself. The son might later relive the father's

sacrifice with difficulty. In any case, the survivor remains aware that the trauma has damaged his own psychic integration and that his usual defences have not provided adequate protection. The survivor can then react in three ways:

1. Letting the experience destroy you. The *concentration camp syndrome* sets in, based on the feeling of inability to reconstitute oneself, on guilt and the feeling of perceived injustice: "I have suffered so much, and on top of that I have to justify myself, to be accountable!"
2. Denying any lasting consequences. The person does not deny the historical fact experienced, but he/she denies, represses or represses everything that can be linked to the current effects; he/she refuses the idea of a necessary personal restructuring or an inevitable relational, axiological or cultural restructuring. This process may be conscious (denial), preconscious (denial, repression) or unconscious (repression);
3. struggle to remain conscious and try to cope with the most terrible dimensions for him, and be able to reintegrate (reconstitute) himself.

In his excellent book entitled *The Invisible Spring* (1994) Fisher takes up the question of extreme situations experienced collectively (wars, natural disasters, genocide, etc.) but he includes situations experienced individually (illnesses, AIDS, accidents, loss of a loved one, etc.) in which the person is confronted with death, that of others (already produced or feared) or his own, perceived as possible, probable or inevitable.

In these times of distress, the meaning and purpose of life is forced upon the consciousness of those involved. It is as if we only worry about the purpose of life and the meaning of our identity when we are distraught, in an unbearable situation. As Bettelheim (1979) points out, this quest would allow us to understand the true meaning of our ordeal, or incidentally that of others, because 'the worst of the ordeals are softened as soon as one believes that the state of distress is reversible and that it will certainly have an end' (*op.cit.* 15). If life loses all meaning, the person feels that suicide is a fatal solution. But the temptation to commit suicide is most often associated with a desperate cry for help, to elicit a response from others to regain the meaning of one's own life, which is the only antidote to suicide if it is linked to the love and help of others (even if the person runs away from and rejects this help).

Resilience and survival

We therefore need to take the provisional definition of resilience proposed above and add to it. To declare that a child is resilient certainly implies that he or she has experienced a situation or event with a high risk of dysfunction, an 'abuse' causing high stress and disruptive effects (a restrictive or extensive definition of abuse and of the highly stressful nature of the situation or event);

But this child is by definition resilient only if he or she has been able to get through this situation, to live through this event without major disruptive effects on his or her psychological and social development; hence the question of the definition of normal psychological development, normal behaviour. We can indeed consider that, throughout his life, the person is confronted with multiple problems, must manage or overcome multiple conflicts. These conflicts even facilitate their subjective dynamics (being a subject who is not subjugated or alienated) and their personal capacity to make choices, to orient themselves through projects, to give meaning to their very difficulties. We must not forget, of course, that this person lives and progresses in social contexts which include their systems of rules (institutions) and propagate harmonised or opposed systems of values (cultures). In other words, social structures carry meanings that find their legitimacy in cultural works, belief systems and explanations of the world and of life, which the person will appropriate, transform or reject. Similarly, social changes necessarily influence personal changes. It is important to analyse these dynamic links (Esparbès-Pistre and Tap, 2001). The constant confrontation of subjects and institutions provokes, between the former and the latter, a real "*interstructuration*" (Baubion-Broye, Malrieu and Tap, 1987). There are not only interactions or transactions, but reciprocal structuring or destructuring.

The description and analysis of the subjective side of this process allows a better understanding of the conflictual evolution and the strategies of the person through four phases, the duration of which can vary greatly (from a few days to several years) and which are likely to recur:

- the phase of *plural anchorage and socio-cultural hold*: the subject constructs representations, values and modes of conduct, in a complex interplay of interpersonal relationships (dual and plural) and social relationships (proximal or distal), through conditioning, imitation, identification and attributive internalization;
- *Conflictual disengagement*: the subject experiences conflicts, is the object of imbalances, is in a position of disengagement, uprooting and crisis. Habitual behaviours that have become

inappropriate must give way to others that allow the crisis to be overcome. Indeed, the subject confronted with a totally new situation, in crisis, in conflict or in rupture, will have to abandon his usual strategies. Their *style* (personal conformity, personal frame of reference) is called into *question*. It is no longer sufficient to ensure adaptation. Unable to use the usual regulations, he/she will have to take risks, look for new solutions, adopt or invent more adapted strategies.

- the *mobilising recovery* is precisely the phase during which the subject, in a crisis situation, tries to face, deal with or resolve his or her own conflicts, by establishing new social links, new networks of reciprocal help;

- the last phase of *creative enterprise* can only take place if the mobilisation has led to moments of individual or collective achievement and invention. During this *implementation* phase, new anchors are created by rebalancing, facilitating the emergence of a new institute. (Baubion, Malrieu and Tap, *op.cit.*).

From extreme situation to abuse

The initial remarks concerning the definition of resilience itself led us to link it to extreme situations and to *abuse*. The latter is sometimes defined very restrictively as physical violence (domestic or institutional), in particular sexual abuse. Other authors propose broader definitions. For example, two Swiss psychiatrists, Maurice Hurni and Giovanna Stoll, have published two revealing works on what can be called "psychological violence". Both books deal with the issue of *narcissistic perversion*: "*La haine de l'amour. La perversion du lien*" (1996) and "*Saccages psychiques au quotidien. Narcissistic perversion in families*" (2002). The notion of narcissistic perversion has been widely developed from the work of Stoller (1975), Racamier (1987, 1992, cf. Bayle, 1997), Eiguer (1989, 1991, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001) and Hirigoyen (1998, 2001). Of course, as Eiguer rightly reminds us in *On the Proper Use of Narcissism*, we all know, intuitively, that we need to love ourselves a little and trust ourselves to succeed in life. However, he adds: "two tendencies clash. The first one understands narcissism in an essentially dysfunctional perspective, leading to deleterious, egocentric and hateful behaviours ... the second trend is sensitive to narcissistic deficiencies deserving priority treatment for support and comfort. Its advocates ... recall the effect of trauma and abuse, the consequences of which cannot be reduced to unconscious fantasy alone' (1999, 23-24).

What is common, one might say, to the 'abuser' and his victim is narcissism, perverse and deviant in the former, seriously abused in the latter. In this context, Eiguer discusses *sexual perversions* (2001), Racamier focuses on the issue of *incest* (1991, 1992, 1995) and Hirigoyen analyses the causes and effects of *moral harassment*, in everyday life (1998) and in professional life (2001).

Psychological violence is therefore the work of *manipulative narcissistic perverts*. This violence is much less visible; the manipulative pervert uses seduction, humiliation and blackmail to achieve his ends. This disguised terrorism comes from a person who is deaf to the suffering of others and who knows neither shame nor remorse. It is said to be guided by a hatred of tenderness "and of everything that melts the heart". The child of manipulative and perverse parents rarely complains of abuse because he or she has internalized the negative image of himself or herself that his or her parents project. The parents may not have wanted them. Hurni and Stoll quote this terrible sentence addressed by a mother to her daughter, in front of witnesses: "I admire you, my darling, for holding on so well while I did everything to abort you". There are words that kill the desire to exist, to desire, to be oneself. This perversity is not limited to the family and is rarely punished. It is based on a *feeling of omnipotence*, outside the laws that perverts like to transgress (without being caught). What surprises the authors cited is that perverted manipulators are not only insensitive to the feelings of others, but also give the impression of not suffering, and even of enjoying it.

It should be noted that the examples given of resilience rarely mention this type of abuse. Most often, they refer to war, survival in concentration camps, the consequences of alcohol or drugs, beatings, rape and incest, etc. It is therefore appropriate to analyse resilience in this original context. It is therefore appropriate to analyse resilience in this original context. But the notion of *abuse* and *resilience must be* broadened together.

Transition and resilience

The term *transition* is often used as a simple synonym for *change*. But it implies a certain kind of change, in the continuity of a journey. Derived from the Latin *transire* (to die), transition was first associated with agony, the passage from life to death. Today, facilitating transition means, fortunately in a more general way, avoiding a rupture, managing the crisis in a more continuous and flexible way, maintaining the link, while transforming the relationship, by giving it another meaning. Is this not the way to understand the co-parenting relationship? "To

what extent should ex-spouses who have children in common cooperate after their separation? (Cloutier, 2001). This is the paradox: the break-up puts an end to the conjugal relationship, but it does not eliminate the role of parent: we are father or mother for life, "the child does not separate". We must therefore *continue but change the type of relationship*, maintain a bond but one that is no longer based on the love of the ex-spouse or on sexuality. *"The challenge of co-parenting is to develop a functional support relationship between the ex-spouses on bases other than the couple relationship, minimising manifestations of hostility and concern because they are detrimental to adaptation"* (Cloutier, op. cit., 86).

Co-parenting can therefore facilitate the *transition*, if it is perceived as a *movement and passage (process) from state A (past to divorce) to state B (single parenthood or recomposition or solitude)*.

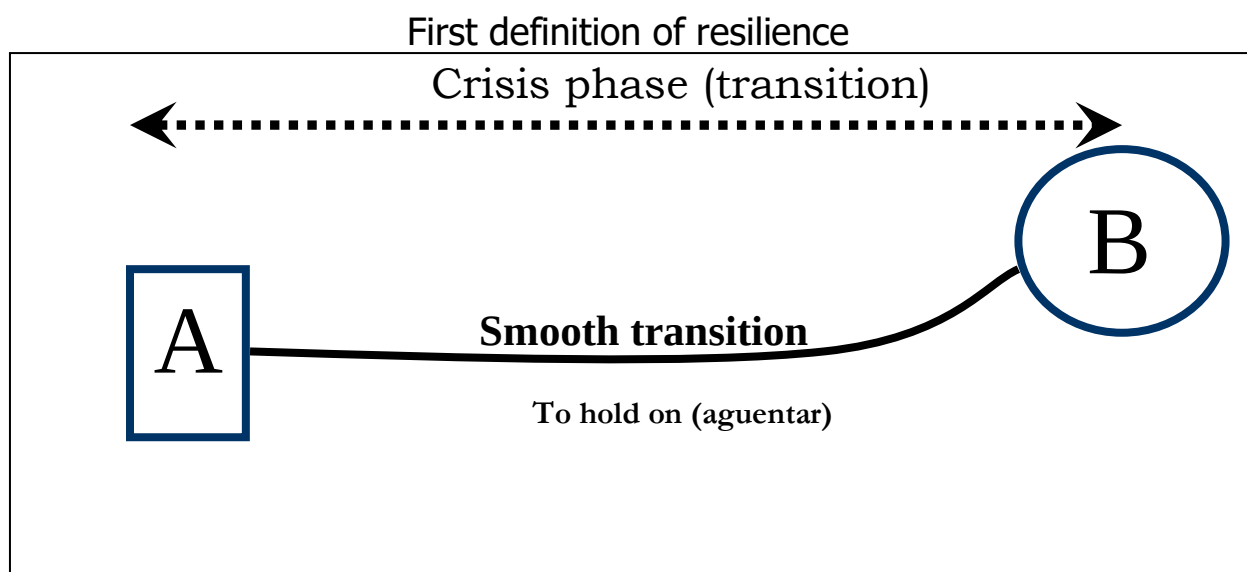
In any case, transition is only possible if transactions are undertaken to improve communication and organisational efficiency: *any transaction requires compromises acceptable to all.* ²

But how can we explain the great differences in the adjustment of former spouses and their children in the way they manage the change and facilitate the transition? We have seen that a significant number of children from single-parent families did not seem to suffer too much from the new living environment or from their new living conditions.

Resilience, endurance, styles and strategies

The notion of *resilience* has a double meaning: the first indicates *the ability of a body to resist a shock* (from the Latin *resilientia*) which Bettelheim associates with the capacity to undergo the original trauma without major difficulty. In psychological terms, this first meaning can be concretised by the expression "to hold on" (*aguentar* in Portuguese).

² In the words of Habermas (1987), co-parenting is a difficult exercise since it consists of articulating the instrumental and intentional reason (efficiency, rationality, etc.) with the communicational reason (good friendship, talking to each other, low hostility, etc.). This effort of articulation is made by only one parent in four.



Another meaning introduces the idea that the negative effect of the trauma is *terminated*, *cancelled* (from the Latin *resilire*, e.g. to *terminate a contract*); there would be a return to the previous state. This second meaning is also used by physicists when they refer to the *flexibility* of an object returning to its previous form after pressure, for example the *spring* (mola).

To be resilient is therefore first of all to *be able to cancel the effects of shock* (cf. *resilientia* = resiliation, cancellation). Sometimes denial (of the reality of the facts or the situation) can be useful. We can say that "holding on" by denial or by distancing oneself is a *fluid transition*: the rupture is not experienced as such; the conflict is not perceived, or, if it is, it does not destabilise the person. But this may only be an appearance: the retention involved in 'holding on' may cause internal difficulties, or these difficulties may be postponed over time, gradually, through wear and tear.

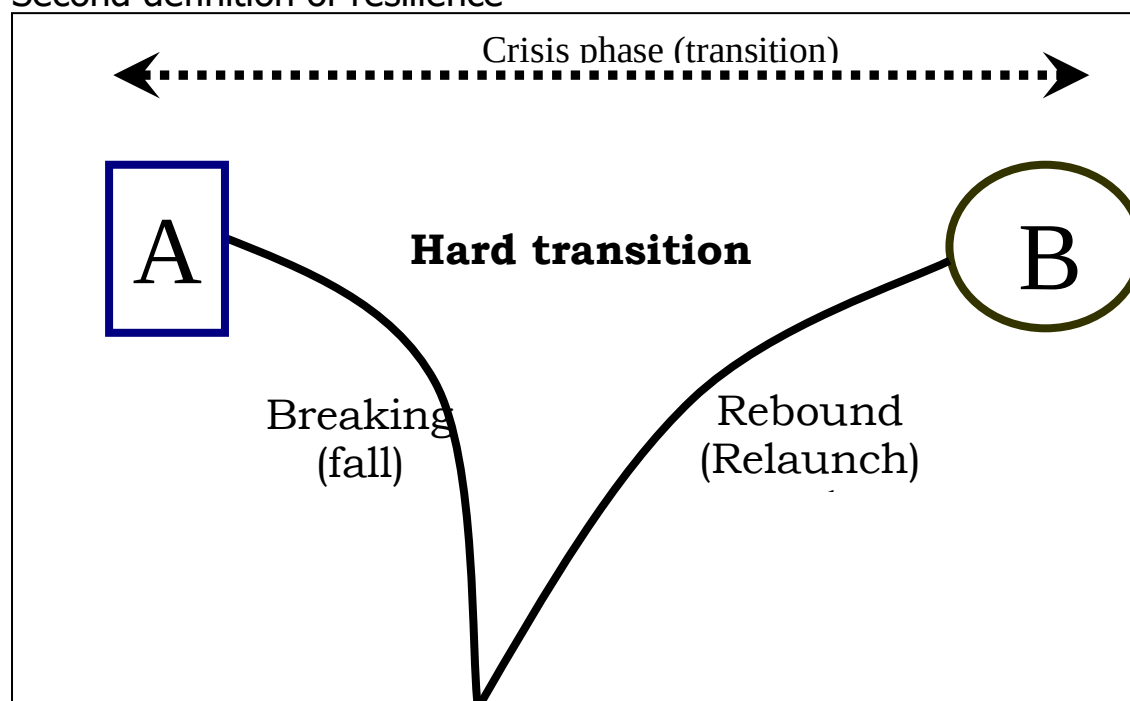
But a second definition of resilience (linked to the verb *resilire*) is used, more optimistic? more realistic? We could speak here of a *hard transition*: the break-up and its effects are not denied, but the person will 'go back up the slope', fight against depression or hostility, get back on track, 'start again on the right foot', etc.

As Vanistendael (1998) points out, resilience is in any case associated with 'the ability to succeed, to live and develop positively, in a socially acceptable way, despite stress or adversity that normally carries the serious risk of a negative outcome'. But where does this resilient ability, or conversely, vulnerability to difficult situations, come from? Is this *key to becoming resilient to be*

found in the past, in genes or temperament, or in the ability to learn to "live with the blows of fate with an equal soul?"

When Fisher titles his book *The Invisible Spring* (1994) he introduces this image of an ability to *bounce back* from a phase of pressure - repression - depression, to *bounce back* (resaltar) but then to be able to *restore the balance*, to return to calm. This process is of course applicable to many situations, even if they are not objectively 'extreme'. But what is important is how the subject experiences the situation; it may be dramatic for him or her, even if others minimise its importance. *Resilience* is widely used in Canada as a synonym for resilience. For example, the Department of Supply and Services Canada (and in particular its *Office of Alcohol, Drugs and Dependency Issues*) has been publishing material on *resiliency* on the Internet since 1995. *Relevance in the context of health promotion*. Resiliency is defined as follows: "*Resiliency is the ability of individuals and systems (families, groups and communities) to cope successfully with a high risk or very adverse situation. This ability develops and changes over time. It is reinforced by protective factors in the individual or in the system and environment, and contributes to the maintenance or improvement of good health.*" (Mangham, C., McGrath, P., Reid, G. & Stewart, M., 1995)

Second definition of resilience



Flexibility in this way usually facilitates a certain *endurance*. Flexibility and endurance are often considered as personality characteristics included in a *lifestyle*. Let us therefore analyse

the notion of lifestyle in relation to the identity of the person. For example, Erikson (1950, 1968) proposes to distinguish *personal identity* and *ego identity*. The former would be limited to two characteristics: the perception of *self-sameness*, of existential continuity, and the perception that others recognise this similarity and continuity. On the other hand, the ego identity would be linked to *the ego quality of this existence*. The articulation between these two identities would constitute the *style of individuality of the person* who, through his or her own characteristics, would come to establish *authentic* and *meaningful* relationships with other people.

Style is therefore based on the *subject's own characteristics*. It implies a certain personal stability and conformity, a certainty about the existence and value of the self, the fact of perceiving oneself as the same. The *strategies*, on the other hand, are articulated in the relationship that the subject establishes between his or her tension for achievement and the situation that hinders or prevents his or her progress (situational demands, uncertainties, new things perceived as dangerous). This articulation takes on meaning for him, positively or negatively, in terms of objectives to be sought, means to be found, self-esteem to be revived, control to be re-established. It is this articulation that can be more or less supple and flexible, or rigid, or non-existent. When Bettelheim evokes the importance of (internal) integration in the face of the external situation, it is indeed this articulation that is at stake; but he shows the importance of the solidity of internal references (values, beliefs) or their *restoration* when psychic integration has been damaged. It therefore places more emphasis on style, without however minimising the importance of adaptation to the situation and the strategies or tactics that facilitate it.

Flexibility can be defined as the individual's ability to develop new *strategies*, to abandon those that have become ineffective or irrelevant (Rowland, 1989, Mages and Mendelsohn, 1979), which will promote good adaptation. This adaptive flexibility implies the ability to make concessions, to manage contradictory demands as best as possible. (Esparbès-Pistre and Tap, 2001; Vinay, Esparbès-Pistre and Tap, 2000)

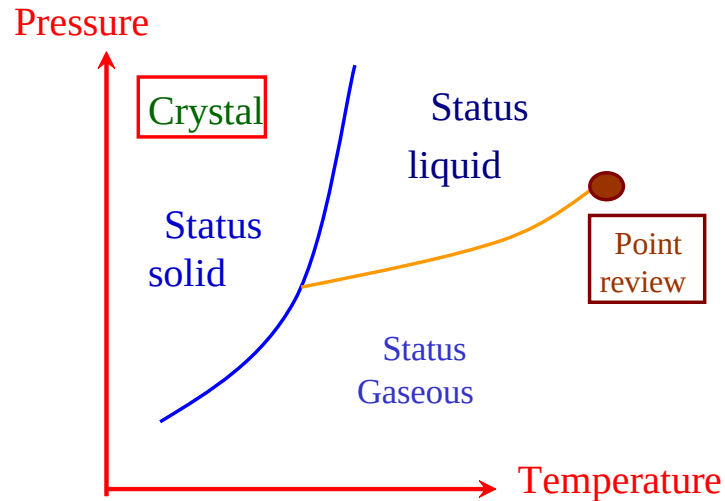
"Any *strategy* is characterised by the articulation, in an individual or collective actor, of a finalised internal logic and realising behaviours. It implies the implementation of an investment energy and a decision dynamic, in the definition of goals (intermediate or final), in the choice of means (material or symbolic) and in the follow-up of itineraries facilitating the elaboration or the execution of a project" (Tap, Esparbès, Sordes-Ader, 1995).

The activation of the strategic process implies the dynamic articulation of three indispensable and inseparable elements: the *actors* (individual or collective) with their resources, constraints and potentialities, the *situation* with its nature, constraints and stakes, and the *goals* pursued by the actors (Camilleri et al. , 1990).

The strategies are part of a wider process, the *personalisation* process, which includes the management of the present situation (*coping strategies, adaptation*), the affirmation or defence of the identity, present and past (*identity strategies, anchoring, attachment, affirmation of the Ego or We*), the quest for recognition of a social position (*strategies of positioning and social commitments, socialisation, legitimisation, recognition*) and the orientation towards a future, involving *project strategies* (anticipation, openness, search for routes).

Resilience, adaptive flexibility, stress and transitions: metaphors from physics

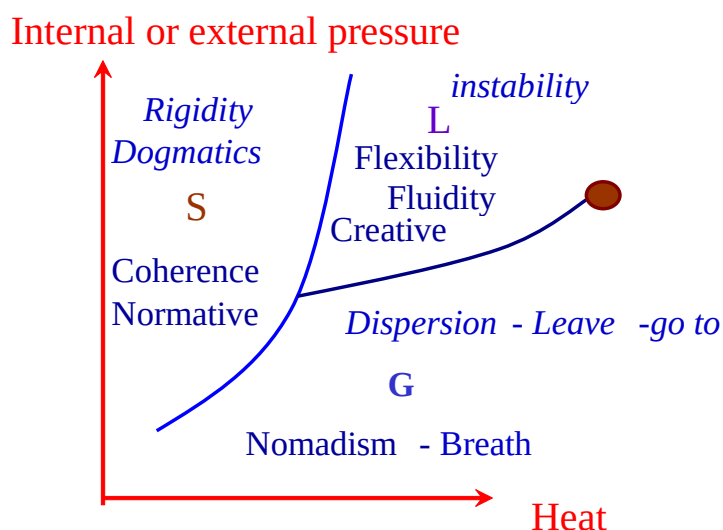
The notions of resilience, stress, flexibility and transition are constantly used by physicists. *Stress* refers to the ability of metal to resist *torsion*, *resilience* to its *ability to resist shock*. The notion of transition is used in physics as well as in chemistry to signify changes of state. The best known example is the *transitions associated with the changes between the three states of matter*: solid, liquid and gas. *Sublimation* is the transition (in both directions) between the gaseous and solid states. *Melting* is the term associated with the transition between the solid and liquid states. Finally, *vaporisation* concerns the transition between the liquid and the gaseous state. Henri Atlan has already used the metaphor of states of matter in his theories of complexity in his book *Between Crystal and Smoke* (1979). His proposal can be extended and made more complex in psychology. Pressure can symbolise *morphogenesis* (structuring of forms), temperature would represent *energetic mechanisms* (cf. Piaget on the relationship between the formal - cognitive and the energetic - affective, etc.).



Phase diagram of a pure body
(from Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1994)

From this first diagram and from the analysis of psychological theories (old or recent) we can take the physical notions in a "figurative" sense and evoke the following analogies:

1. The notion of *solidity* refers to the structure of the system and the diversity of its forms. It is associated with *coherence* (Antonovsky, 1990) or *congruence* (Rogers, 1951) as well as with *control* (Bandura, 2003) and the *balance of* the system (Piaget, 1975). At the level of beliefs, we can speak of *normative coherence*, i.e. a coherent hierarchy of values and norms from which the person determines and legitimises his/her actions. Conversely, *dogmatism* is one of the negative characteristics of belief systems, just as *rigidity* characterises any system that refuses the changes necessary for adaptation (cf. mental and motor rigidity, etc.)



2. The transition from *solid* to *liquid* (and back) is called *fusion-solidification* by physicists (a process including the "glassy" transition, the "rubbery" plateau and the liquid flow). However, the term *fusional* is often used in psychology and psychoanalysis. For example, Anzieu (1975) evokes "*the group illusion, or tendency to an exhilarating collective fusional state*" which recalls the notion of *collective effervescence* proposed by Durkheim (1912) and which implies sensory experience, images and collective feelings. We can also mention here the notions of *flexibility*, *fluidity*, *suppleness*, *elasticity* or *plasticity* which are often used to describe very diverse psychological processes. For example, verbal fluidity is associated with creativity (Torrance, 1962). Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 2004) proposed the theory of *flow* (flow = psychic energy) showing that people happily live an *optimal experience* during which things *flow* by themselves. These people experience these situations pleasantly and without apparent effort. Bouffard, translator of the previous author (2004), refers to the work of Brandstadter and Renner (1990) who propose to differentiate between the *tenacity* thanks to which the subject can change the external conditions, and the *flexibility* which allows him to adapt to these conditions without putting himself in a position of insecurity. With regard to *elasticity*, Paul Claudel wrote in *L'élasticité américaine* "There is a quality in the American temperament that is translated there by the word *resiliency*, for which I cannot find an exact equivalent in French, because it unites the ideas of elasticity, resilience, resourcefulness and good humour" (1965, quoted by Tisseron, 2003). It should be noted that the use of the term *resilience* in psychology did not come into use until the end of the 1960s (Fritz Redl, 1969, 'ego resiliency') and was therefore widely present in American popular speech.

The notion of *resilience* in fact implies a double reference to *robustness* (control; protection; capacity to resist) and *flexibility* (Tap and Vinay, 2000). This flexibility is adaptive in the sense that it avoids rupture and favours successful transactions with the environment or with those around us.

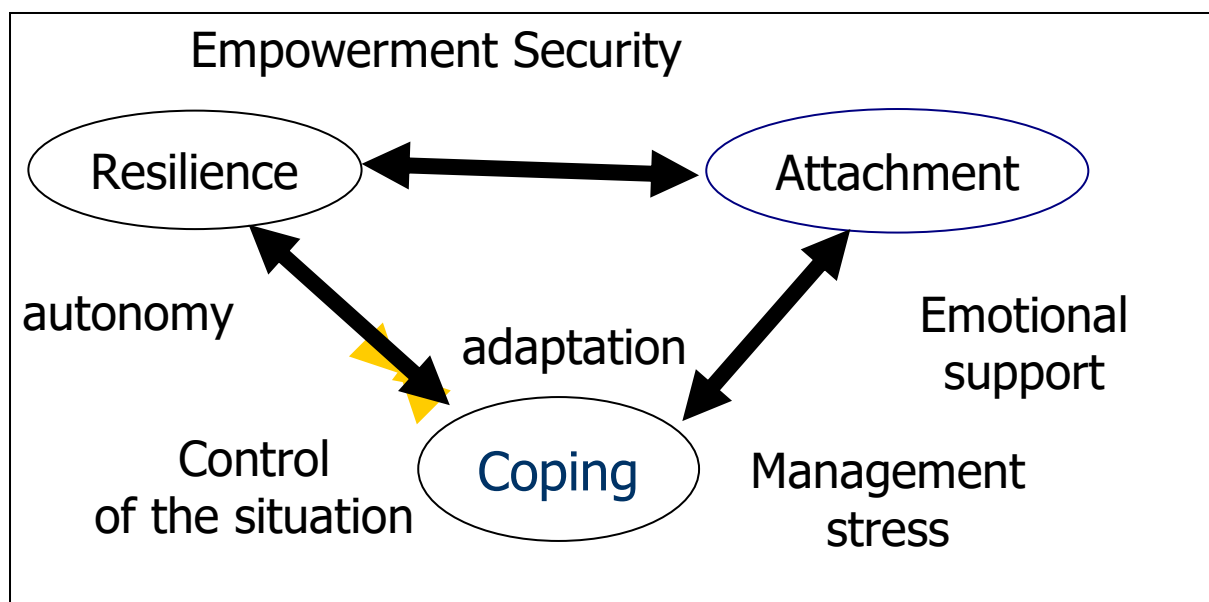
3. The notion of *gaseous volatility* can be negatively associated with self-dispersion, with letting oneself go, but it can also be linked to Eastern conceptions which emphasise the experiential process (the path) rather than the structures or the results (the goal). But it is around the notion of the *vital breath (atman)* dear to the Brahmanic, Indian doctrines, that we see volatility best evoked. The notion of atman is often equated with the *self*, but it has both a personal and a transpersonal or cosmic meaning, as if the individual soul could merge at the same time into the soul of the world.

The positive terms of solidity, coherence, flexibility, fluidity, or the more negative terms of rigidity, instability, inconsistency, sloppiness, etc. are constantly used in research or discourse on resilience, on the optimal functioning of the personality. It remains to be clarified what these physical metaphors conceal and how they can be positively used to understand the processes associated with the notion of resilience.

A discussion of the nature and origins of resilience

Even if certain authors mention the fact that the resilient aptitude is not a basic 'given' (hereditary, temperamental), that it develops and changes over the course of a lifetime (Mangham et al. 1995), the temptation is strong to consider resilience as a biological force inscribed in the structure of the body. We start from the hypothesis that the resilient individual is one who has benefited during early childhood from good emotional and relational conditions, from *positive attachment and anchoring links*. (Vinay, Esparbès-Pistre & Tap, 2000)³. These positive ties may have facilitated the necessary *emotional security*, the learning of the *primary capacity to manage stress* and, more generally, the multiple emotions, frustrations and prohibitions with which young children are rapidly confronted

³ But this achievement is not definitive. It can vary according to events and periods in life.



. This capacity will allow him to show that he is 'big' and that he knows how to *control the situation* as well as his impulses. Understanding resilient behaviour means understanding the way in which the subject deals with difficult, extreme and risky situations and the resources he or she mobilises to adapt to them and get through them. But resilience cannot be reduced to stress management. It implies the ability to make sense of the situation, to exercise power over the situation, but also over oneself and over others. *Empowerment* can thus be described as the process by which a person who finds himself in more or less incapacitating living conditions develops, through concrete actions, the feeling that it is possible to exercise greater control over aspects of his psychological and social reality. This feeling would tend to accentuate the emergence of other feelings such as feelings of *autonomy*, *meaning*, *self-efficacy* and *self-determination*, but also of *self-confidence* (positive self-evaluation).

The term *empowerment* has been variously translated. In French, no less than five concepts are associated with it, which can be classified according to the nature of the processes evoked:

The shift in power: *delegation, transmission, redistribution* ;

The psychological processes at work in access to power: *empowerment, appropriation*. We could add here that of *potentiation*, close to the notion of *latency* in the theory of power proposed by Parsons (1966, 1971), that of *potential* evoked by Rogers in relation to *personal power* (1977, 1979) or that of *restoration-integration (internal)* which we have taken from Bettelheim (1979).

But the very analysis of empowerment leads to its opposite: alienation causing feelings of powerlessness and humiliation, the repression of being and acting, the limitation of oneself by deprivation (of freedom in particular), by the loss of values and disability (physical or

psychological). It should be noted here that abuse is an *abuse of power* (on the part of the abuser) as well as an *impossible access to power* (for the victim of abuse).

Lawyers refer to the notion of *legal incapacity*, of which three levels can be specified, gradually facilitating access to power (*empowerment*):

1. *Representation/guardianship* is used in respect of persons who are incapacitated, deprived of the exercise of their rights and unable to manage them themselves. A third person acts in their place as guardian, this "substitute" person manages their situation. 2. *Assistance/accompaniment* is a more flexible process that allows the person to act on their own provided that a "capable" person is present at the time of the act to help them; 3. *Authorisation* differs from assistance; it is the last level of legal incapacity before the emergence of empowerment. Authorisation depends on the other. Power here is dissymmetrical, external, it must be sought in order to be able to do, say, live... But it will become internal: it will also have to be sought in terms of "authorising oneself to". Authorisation is in a way the obligatory passage in *the dynamics of power displacement*; it introduces the subsequent psychological processes of empowerment and appropriation. (Tap and Oubrayrie-Roussel, 2004; Tap and Vasconcelos, 2004).

But access to power (internal and external) favours personalisation as a subject's struggle to free itself from alienations, also internal and external. Seeman (1959) proposed *five dimensions of alienation*: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and value isolation.

It is possible to define the *process of personalisation* (by which the individual becomes a person) on the basis of the five inverted dimensions of alienation: access to *power*, the quest for *meaning*, the quest for *autonomy*, the ability to construct (or *reconstruct*) a *value system* or to develop *projects*, all of which enable the person to *realise himself or herself through the implementation of actions* (Tap, 1988, 1996).

Of course the processes of personalisation and alienation and the feelings associated with them are present in every individual. Put another way, behaviours are not totally negative or totally positive. Similarly, it can be said that the feeling of omnipotence is not the same as reality, and that the person always has to deal with problems, to struggle with vulnerabilities. In Anthony and Cohen's book (1987) there is a description of 'invulnerable' children. This notion is obviously highly debatable, not to mention ideologically dangerous!

Resilience, Risks, Protections and Coping

Much American research is based on the opposition between what accentuates *risks* and what favours the *protection of* the person against these risks, in difficult situations. Put another way, protective factors increase resilience, while risks are thought to make it more difficult to emerge and maintain resilience.

Let's take some examples:

1. Easterbrooks, A., Davidson, A., & Chazan, R. (1993) assess the role of *risk and protective factors in the adjustment of school-aged children* (7 years old), through the analysis of interactions with their mothers and attachment strategies, family risks, relationship with teachers, and intellectual characteristics of children. The authors find that children are not invulnerable to stressful events in their environment, such as economic stress or inadequate care. Living in a high-risk environment, they argue, reduces opportunities to develop self-confidence and skills in everyday activities. Emotionally resilient children demonstrate personal competence despite the risks they face.

- 2 Grossman et al (1992) analyse risk and resilience in young adults. Using in-depth individual and group interviews at first and three months later, they identify *protective factors* specific to these lower middle class youths. They use a risk and vulnerability assessment method with 200 students (mostly female). According to the authors, protective factors are excellent predictors of adolescent adjustment, and this tendency is more pronounced for girls than for boys.

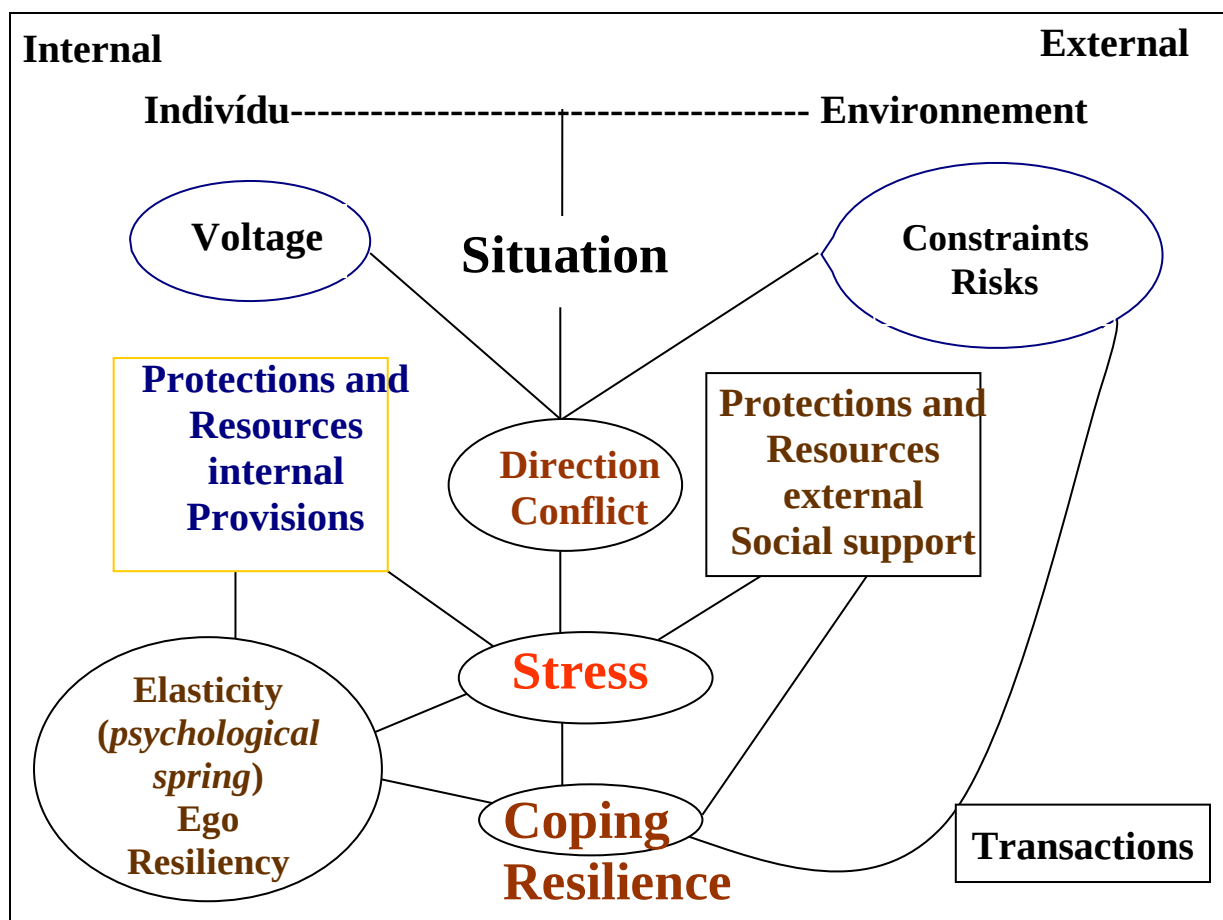
3. Cicchetti et al (1993) examine evidence of the ability of disadvantaged and abused children (neglect, abuse and sexual abuse) to function well despite exposure to high stress and risk. 127 disadvantaged and abused school-aged children are compared to a control group of 79 non-abused school-aged children attending a summer camp programme. The maltreated and non-maltreated children did not differ in their assessment of prosocial behaviour, externalisation of behavioural problems, self-reported depressive symptoms and risk indicators for school adjustment problems. The authors found, however, that maltreated children showed significantly greater maladjustment on several of the adjustment variables (more aggressive and withdrawn). However, maltreated children were able to develop self-control, resilience and positive self-esteem while living in adverse conditions.

Of course, in order to be able to verify whether a variable induces a risk or is a good protection, it is necessary to introduce a follow-up, a longitudinal method, an a posteriori verification.

Some remarks can be made about this triadic approach (risks, protections, resilience):

a. First of all, we must not forget that *there is only a situation of a subject who lives it* (situation and environment are not to be confused). When we talk about a *stressful situation*, we wrongly assume that its stressful nature is objective and obvious; however, it is the *meaning* that the subject gives to his situation and the fact that it takes on a *conflicting character* for him, which determines the *stressful* quality of the situation. Moreover, there is only real conflict and stressful experience for the subject if an *internal tension* is associated with the external risks and constraints, depending on the use of resources and the benefit of external and internal protection. Coping strategies are used to combat stress. They can be more or less effective (for the notion of coping cf. Garnezy, N., & Rutter, M. - 1983; Sordes-Ader F., Fsian H., Esparbès S., & Tap P.- 1995, etc.).

b. The stressful nature of the situation can only be understood insofar as the subject is forced to *work at the limit of his or her perceived capacities*. But he is not totally isolated; he can use a network of people who support him (social support). Coping with the problem therefore involves multiple *transactions*, with the social environment as well as with the physical environment. Transactions are reciprocal actions based on *negotiation* and *empowerment dynamics*.



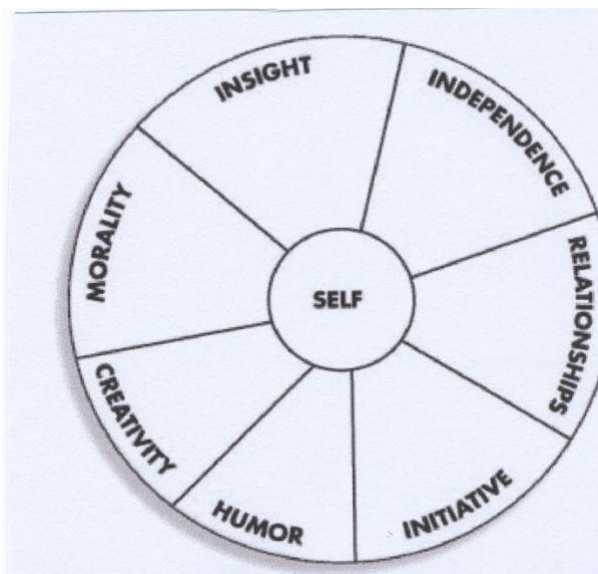
Resilience and ego resiliency

In English, resilience is sometimes seen as a disposition, a characteristic of the ego. Jeanne H. Block and Jack Block (1980) have proposed the notion of *ego resiliency* as "a dynamic capacity for modification of ego control in response to context". These authors use the notions of *permeability* and *elasticity*, proposed by Lewin (1959). Elasticity is the ability of the subject to change his or her relative level of permeability according to the situation and to return to it, or to re-establish it later. The impermeable ego would be based on control that is too rigid, restrained, inhibited, cut off from the reality of the environment and the satisfaction of one's own needs. The non-elastic Ego would be weakened by its adaptive incapacity. However, it should be noted that the two blocks had been working for a long time on the topological representation of the structure of the ego (J. Block, 1950, J.H. Block, 1951, cited by Huey and Weisz, 1997). Resilience' (in American terms) involves taking into account the interactions between the subject's dispositions and the characteristics of the situation and other people. The notion of *ego-resiliency* is much more focused on the subject's dispositions, to anticipate, by prevention, the subject's ability or not to adapt to a likely critical situation.

Ego resilience and personal development and early prevention.

Resilience is an interesting concept insofar as it introduces major questions about how we *live* and *survive* and forces us to discuss whether there are ways of suffering less, resisting the hassles of daily life better, liquidating stress, etc. But it also introduces serious concerns if its use consists in assuming that there are winners or chosen ones who hold the miracle cure for optimising the quality of life, while others do not. But it also introduces serious concerns if it is used to assume that there are winners or *chosen ones* who hold the miracle cure for optimising quality of life, while others are eternal losers. Detailing the skills and protections for some, the incapacities and risks for others would have catastrophic effects on the latter, who would thus find themselves stigmatised. One could of course reply that knowing the resilient modalities (the ability to resist and bounce back despite the suffering linked to abuse and bereavement) is very useful for orienting early prevention and health education. This is true, provided that resilience is not seen as a paranormal phenomenon that affects only a few individuals with a strength that others do not have. This process can be generalised from a complex analysis of the interactions between defensive processes linked to primary narcissism, to the management of anguish in a situation of bereavement, in relation to the development of normality of the person in a difficult situation.

In their book *The resilient self: how survivors of troubled families rise above adversity* (1993) Steven and Sibil Wolin present the results of their research using the 7 resiliencies model. They studied the evolution of seven systems of competence from childhood to adulthood, these seven systems being presented in the form of a *mandala*.



after Wolin and Wolin (1993), see also www.Projectresilience.com

These can be summarised here. The seven dimensions of resilience according to these authors are

* *Insight*: Childhood: *sensing* (intuitive, preverbal feeling that something is wrong with the world); adolescence: *knowing* (knowledge, well-articulated and systematic awareness of problems); adult: insight matures into *understanding*: empathy with self and others, tolerance of complexity and ambiguity.

Independence: establishing a physical and emotional distance between oneself and the sources of the problem in one's life. Childhood: *straying*, Adolescence: emotional disengagement (*desengaging*) he/she detaches from problematic situations and stands up for himself/herself. In adults, independence takes the form of *separation*: taking control to overcome grief.

Relationships: making full connections with others: in childhood: *contacting* (making contact) making fleeting connections with others, emotionally available. Adolescent deliberately tries to engage (*recruit*) with adults and peers who help and support them. The adult experiences *attaching*, i.e. mutual and rewarding personal bonds, involving a balance between *giving* and *taking*.

Initiative, problem solving. The child *explores*, experiments by trial and error in the physical world. The adolescent *works*, solving problems and other goal-directed behaviours in relation to a wide range of activities. The adult acquires the ability to *generate* projects with enthusiasm and to take on challenging situations.

Creativity, the use of imagination, and Humour

Creativity and humour are linked. Both are refuges where experiences can be rearranged according to how the subject makes connections and correspondences. Both begin in childhood with *playing*, using the imagination to make a mode that conforms to their desires. In adolescence, playing turns into *shaping*: using art and comedy to give aesthetic form to one's deepest thoughts and feelings. In adults creativity becomes *composing*, serious artistic endeavours. *Humour* becomes laughter, the ability to make something out of nothing, to minimise pain with a pun, a joke. Humour consists in finding comedy in the tragic. The offspring of creativity, humour also begins (begins) with play, grows (grows) into acting and matures (matures) into laughter, into the ability to see an absurd side to one's sorrows and problems.

Morality involves acting on the basis of an informed conscience. In childhood, morality is seen in *judging*, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. In adolescence, morality is transformed into establishing a value system (valuing), making decisions and having a principled conduct. In the adult, morality blossoms into altruism, *serving*. He acquires a sense of obligation to contribute to the well-being of others.

The dynamics of identifications as one of the foundations of resilience

This notion of ego-resilience has the disadvantage of minimising interactions with the environment, with the situation and with others and their essential role in the development of the child's capacities. The child needs anchoring, love and recognition. Attachment strategies facilitate the management of these needs. But the resilient child has experienced difficulties in this area. For example, orphaned and abandoned children have had difficulty finding emotional means of anchoring, the security of a port of call and people to love and respect, people they can trust. (Vinay, Esparbès-Pistre and Tap, 2000). As Cyrulnik (1999) reminds us, it doesn't take much for everything to fall apart, but all that is needed is a point of support, a hand held out like a lifeline to emerge, rebuild, regain a taste for life and hope again.

Here we can take up with interest the differential trilogy proposed by Lacan concerning *deprivation* (reality), *frustration* (imaginary) and *castration* (symbolic). But the absence of the father (for example) makes it difficult to accept real or imaginary limits and symbolic limitations. As Cyrulnik again says, 'these deficient children are so eager for identification that there is little that can be done to give them a line of development' (1998, 74). Reinforcing this hypothesis, Durning states that 'resilient children seem to be especially adept at actively recruiting surrogate parents, even if they are not kin' (1995, 158). But Wallon (1941) and Erikson (1966) have shown that the child needs to love, admire and trust in order to imitate and identify with the adult. So what comes first - trust or identification? In fact, both are created or destroyed according to the nature of the bonds that are established and their evolution.

Differences between boys and girls have been observed in educational practices which may or may not favour resilience. Boys are resilient if they have lived in a structured family, which values rules, and on the condition that they find male role models (father or, failing that, grandfather, older brother, uncle, etc.) who encourage the expression of emotions. For girls from disadvantaged backgrounds in which the father is constantly absent, it is the image of a socially integrated mother (profession, salary) that constitutes a powerful identification anchor (Durning, *op. cit.*)

These identification processes facilitate access to power (*empowerment*); they do not mean a loss of identity or a lack of self-assertion; on the contrary. The child learns to be the other without losing who he or she is, insofar as by identifying he or she appropriates the qualities of the other while obtaining by this means both affective and cognitive recognition, facilitating his or her quest for similarities and social differentiation.

However, the identification processes should be diversified in terms of their moment of emergence (when), the nature of their content (what) and the relational context (in relation to whom):

Six identifications have been highlighted. Some by Freud and psychoanalysts, others by cognitive-behaviouralists, others by psycho-sociologists (for more details see Tap, 1988, 1996). Identification has, in fact, two functions:

- a *defensive function* through which the process is triggered that allows the subject to resolve a conflict, liquidate an anxiety, overcome a powerlessness or devaluation, and maintain the unity and identity of the self (A. Freud, 1946, 1949).
- A *constructive function* through the consequences that identification establishes in the organisation of personality and behaviour. Identification leads, in fact, to the internalisation of the power of others, of their instrumental competence, of their capacities of protection-affection (Kagan and Lemkin, 1960). Through identification, the child builds a complex system of attitudes and social representations.

The six identifications can be summarised as follows (for more details see Tap, in French 1988, 148-159 or in Portuguese, 1996, 203-217):

1. The identification of dependency :

defensive aspect: fight against the feeling of abandonment

* constructive aspect: access to confidence and emotional security.

2. Identification with the aggressor :

defensive aspect: fight against the anxiety of losing physical integrity

constructive aspect: access to the ability to control emotions or to react through denial, negation or denial

(This type of identification occurs in all children in various ways, both normal and pathological. But it has sometimes been more strongly demonstrated in children who have been subjected to incestuous sexual abuse or other maltreatment. Bettelheim mentions its existence in the defences of concentration camp prisoners).

3. The identification of control :

defensive aspect: fight against the anxiety of powerlessness and failure

* constructive aspect: learning to succeed, capitalisation of skills.

4. Twin and/or specular identification

defensive aspect: fight against the anxiety of bodily and sexual strangeness.

* constructive aspect: appropriation of similarities and emergence of body identity.

5. Categorical identification

defensive aspect: anxiety of rejection, marginality, non-recognition; anxiety related to those who are not "us".

* constructive aspect: experiences of belonging, solidarity, equality and differentiation.

6. Identification with the project

defensive aspect: fear of powerlessness, incompleteness and death

* constructive aspect: quest to surpass oneself, ability to anticipate and manage change, personal or collective idealisation.

Conclusion

In an article entitled "Resilience or the struggle for life", Serge Tisseron (2003), psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, goes to war with the notion of resilience, which he associates with the *struggle* for life dear to the American mentality. Resilience, because it is associated with an 'autonomous ego', would be an instance favouring the success of the most able according to the Darwinian conception. However, in the American view, success is equivalent to virtue. The author makes three criticisms of the notion of resilience. 1. it is ambiguous, because it masks the *fragility of the defences* developed by the person to cope with trauma. Psychic resistance can change in an unpredictable way. Resilience would never be solid; 2. resilience also masks the *great variety of defence mechanisms* designed to fight against the consequences of a trauma. Resilience covers processes of trauma management which can either benefit the 'former victim' and his or her entourage, or benefit the individual at the expense of his or her entourage. The myth of redemption would not be far off, 'the resilient person being supposed to have overcome the dark part of his suffering to keep only the glorious and luminous part'⁴. But the successful overcoming of a trauma does not mean that all traces of hatred, of violence in return against the abusers have disappeared. The return of the social link has been able to "put to sleep, for an indefinite time, the monster lurking in the hollow of bruised personalities". The author concludes by pointing out that the psychoanalysts who were interested in the resistance of trauma (Ferencsi, Anna Freud, Winnicott) gave up the idea of classifying under the same term phenomena that result from the environment as from the psychic potentialities specific to each

⁴ This last remark introduces the criticism of the Manichaeism underlying resilience: victors-victims, dark force-light force, a Manichaeism made explicit directly in a *Star Wars*-type film!

person, and also of classifying Stalin and Mother Teresa in the same category. Several authors refer to the fact that the same psychological process can lead to the best or worst in moral or social terms. Malrieu (2003) shows that the process of personalisation was at work both in an S.S. who came out of his previous condition and found in his fascist commitment a means of social valorisation and personal coherence. The same question is raised in relation to Saddam Hussein by M.R. Cardoso in the journal *Visão* (2003). Jerrold Post (CIA political psychologist)

"descreveu Saddam Hussein como o triste resultado de uma infância atribulada. O pai e o irmão morreram quando mãe estava grávida. Esta attempted to abort and commit suicide. When the little boy Saddam was born, the mother did not want to wear it; she lived with her son for the first three years. De volta à casa materna, encontrou um padrasto violento. He returned to his father, a fervent anti-bioterrorist nationalist, who gave him a study and professed him a "great Arab leader"... this traumatic inferno led to the birth of a man with "messianic ambitions", "consumed by self-adoration" and who "compensated for the violence inflicted on him by transferring it to others". Um louco? Nem pensar, diz. Antes um homem "racional e muito perigoso". (Resilient and perverse: he was undoubtedly so).

Furthermore, Michel Hanus, psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, specialist in the effects of bereavement on mental health (1998), in his book entitled *La résilience, à quel prix? Survivre et rebondir* (2001) analyses examples of resilience in people confronted with difficult situations, particularly children, who, far from collapsing, seem to develop real capacities for resistance and even fulfilment in the face of these trials. The interest of these observations is to show that everyone has hidden resources that can be mobilised in these traumatic circumstances and that the worst is never certain. "However, we should not underestimate the reality of the underlying emotional wound, which has not yet healed.

We are therefore confronted, in relation to resilience, as we were in relation to identity, with a paradoxical notion which includes multiple meanings, but which introduces a major issue: that of trust or distrust in people, psychological processes, human attitudes and mechanisms. We can decide that the depths of the human soul are 'monstrous' or 'naturally good', that the victim can become an executioner (by identification with the aggressor) or repeat his or her victimisation. Working on the pervert/victim/resilient trilogy implies the acceptance of a complexity where each person is not all black and the other all white, where each person is at the same time in search of love, power and recognition, and where the personal story is woven from the social link and the narcissistic process, inseparably. Nor can we dissociate psycho-social processes from the nature of feelings in relation to values and the dynamics of the relationships between these values (scientific, ethical, aesthetic, legal and relational).

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