

A HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF RESILIENCE

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My PhD research

Listening to adults who grew up in care

1. The lived experience of adults who grew up in residential and or foster care as children and the impact of that experience over a life span
2. Variations in outcomes
3. Resilience

Methodology:

A life story interview followed by a resilience interview

Three decades of resilience research ^A

- Positive adaptation to adversity (Luthar, 2000)
- Negative adaptation (Hunter, 1999)
- Protective and risk factors (Rutter, 2000)
- Critical or fateful moments (Giddens, 1991, Thomson, 2002)
- Resilience in the non-traumatized (Bonanno, 2004)
- Belief systems (Ungar, 2008) Weiner and Kupermintz, 2001)
- Social Ecology (Ungar, 2008)
- Survivor guilt (Mastakis, 1999)
- Resistance (Bottrell, 2009)
- Ordinary magic, resiliency and resilience (Masten)

Moira and Joy – from being in care to positive outcomes

In their words how they both are now

- 55 years old
- Enjoy being with children and grandchildren
- In settled relationships Moira 36 years and Joy 20+ years
- Graduates
- Trained and worked as therapists
- Involved with children in care today and adults who were in care Active, busy and settled in local communities
- Sense of contentment and proud of their achievements
- Believe that they can now overcome adversity
- Better outcomes than siblings

Joy's childhood

English mother, Asian father, taken into care at 6 weeks, fostered aged 4 then adopted at 6 by the same white family

“To adopt all of us and actually give us really you know quite high aspirations and all sorts yeah all sorts of things she did for us was quite an amazing thing”

“Brought us up in the middle of the country with ponies, high expectations”

“I think there was something about kind of civilising the savages in a kind of unspoken way...if you like it was a benign form of racism”

“I had to suppress everything I don't think this is healthy but it did allow me to get on with my education”

Assimilation

Moira's childhood

English mother, Irish father, 16 residential placements, including approved school and a psychiatric facility

“Absolute poverty, poverty where we had no cooker our food was cooked on a primus if we had meths or on the open fire”

“We all went into care up until the age of 10 when mum was having babies and poorly and ill and then I was the only one who went to court and had the court order.. So in other words men were abusing me but I was to be punished”

“I think that was my first activism really you know, fucking up the system and fucking up the nuns.... every day you were waking up on the front line and you were going to fight and every day you were going to show I have got my beliefs and I am sticking to them”

Resistance

Disassociation

During the interviews – Spacing out, emotional distancing, inability to focus
All participants reported having disassociated as children, blotting things out, switching off, shutting down, day dreaming and being in a fog

A recognised psychological defence against overwhelming trauma including traumatic relationships with care givers

Symptoms include; Psychic numbing, amnesia, suggestibility, fixed idea, fixed emotion, trance states, behavioural disturbance, depersonalisation, derealisation, bodily disconnection and time distortions (Mulder, 1998, Janet, 1889, Carlson, 2009, Lifton, 1993)

We all do it! And its unconscious

How disassociation affected Joy

The traumas: Loss of birth parents, children's home, foster placement failure, adoption, loss of her racial and cultural identity, racism

Disassociation: Felt like an alien, scared of her 'bad' self, suppressed feelings, disowned her racial identity and connection to her birth parents

Awareness: Begins 20+

Multicultural life, understands the impact of racism, politics, art therapy training, Volcano of destructive anger unleashes, motherhood, failed relationships, fear of not surviving beyond her thirties

18 years therapy, becomes aware of her conscious and unconscious behaviour

Long term partner, self education, politicised about care and adoptive experiences, feels an unbroken lineage as a grandmother, an on-going process

Positive outcome: Awareness of interactions between her and the environment

Created a racial and cultural identity, found her own voice, a new vocabulary

Reclaimed and integrated her 'bad' self, connected, awareness of the on going embodied trauma which cannot be spoken but can be portrayed through images

How disassociation affected Moira

The traumas: Multiple separations and reunions with mother, 16 care placements, repeated sexual, physical and emotional abuse, drugs, deaths of peers, labelled as evil

Disassociation: Lively internal world of fairies, angels and Jesus
Verbally aggressive, destructive, suicidal and Para suicidal behaviour
disowned her 'good' self

Awareness: Begins 18+ , Motherhood saved her life, creates awareness of consequences of risk taking for her children, stops suicidal and Para suicidal behaviour
Long term stable relationship, work with families, education, self education
Becoming a grandmother, getting records, realises she wasn't wicked
Now politicised about being in care and the stigma, an on-going process

Positive outcome: Awareness of interactions between her and the environment
Reclaimed and integrated her 'good self', able to protest and to forgive
Found her own belief system, fought the stigma of having been in care

Joy's siblings ^A

- 3 adopted from the same children's home one long term fostered
- All received very good education
- White adopted brother has mental health problems
- Mixed race brother an alcoholic, no steady work, but 'happy'
- One mixed race sister in and out of violent relationships
- Other mixed race sister, first child adopted, estranged from another child, lives with a 'gangster'

Moira's siblings ^A

- Brother - in care, boarding school, approved school, prison, heroin addiction, finally sober, able to work but needs a lot of support from Moira
- Brother - in care, boarding school, sexually assaulted by master, suspended, approved school, borstal, prison, heroin addiction, died of a heroin overdose
- Sister - in care, good school, heroin addiction, prison, mental health problems, more stable now
- Sister - never in care, good school, criminal record, successful now but estranged from one of her own children and her siblings

Summary

The lived experience of growing up in care over a life span

- Growing up in care was highly individual
- Different environments resulted in similar outcomes
- Similar environments resulted in different outcomes (siblings)

Resilience manifested as

- Being knocked down and getting up again
- Surviving - By any means necessary
- Disassociating
- A dynamic process of assimilation and resistance between the individual and the environment

Positive outcomes occurred in adulthood requiring awareness and agency

Wellbeing can be undermined by the past