

The politics of resilience

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My PhD research

Listening to adults who grew up in care

Why?

1. To allow them to reflect on the lived experience of growing up in care and the life long impact of that experience
2. To understand their resilience
3. A psycho social approach using life stories

The politics of defining resilience

- Positive adaptation to adversity (Mac, Irene)
- Negative adaptation to adversity (Mac, Irene)
- Protective and risk factors (Being taken into care)
- Critical moments (Moirra's twins)
- What is resilience in those who have not been traumatised ?
- Resilience is both culturally and contextually sensitive (War)
- Belief systems and survivor's guilt are under researched

Findings from my own research

The primary aim was to explore the participant's own constructions of resilience. Disassociation was the dominant theme

All of the participants in my research reported, unsolicited that they disassociated as children.

This was initially a protective mechanism to defend against multiple traumas.

However they all still disassociate as adults and this is classified in resilience research as negative adaption (Hunter, 1999; Ince, 1998 & Bonnano, 2004)

Defining Disassociation

- A psychological defence against overwhelming traumatic experiences. Symptoms include; narrowed field of consciousness, amnesia, suggestibility, fixed idea, and emotion, derealisation, depersonalisation or bodily disconnection and time distortions
- We all do it!
- Part of early childhood functioning and of cognitive development in middle childhood and adolescence. Depersonalisation and derealisation may be more common in adolescence
- Multiple influences affect the process by which normal dissociation crystallises into pathological dissociation and early experiences of trauma (especially in care giving relationships) exert particular influence on dissociative developmental trajectories
- Dissociation is culturally constructed and can change over time.

The multiple traumas exposed in my research

- Pre birth trauma, substance abuse, violence, traumatised pregnant mother – (therefore no pre trauma self) (Lifton, R)
- Separation from birth family
- Multiple placements
- Institutionalisation
- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse in birth family and whilst in care
- Adult trauma, cancer, bereavement, substance abuse, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, poor mental health, poverty

In their own words – why disassociate?

Irene: “When my father beat me that’s how I would cope I would just go into my head.”

Maira: “The Very Wicked Girl (VWG) had another story that fed her and her smile – secretly in her dark heart she thought she was a princess – being hit was part of the magic spell to bring her home she did not mind being hit.”

Mac: “The reason I switched off is cos my Dad was a horrible man, an alcoholic who went to prison for abusing my sisters.... there was quite a lot of pain.”

Living with Disassociation

- **Irene (during the resilience interview)** : “I can feel myself sort of disassociating ...I just had to sort of say that to keep me real cos I can and that’s – that’s what I did I disassociated.”
- **Reggie**: “Its like a fog fighting through it and can’t come out the other side.”
- **Sonia**: “It’s restricted me Yvon you know. Cos I try and do things and then I go in a dream, why do I do that?”
- **Mac**: “ I could have killed somebody... in the wrong place at the wrong time I could have really hurt somebody.”

Catastrophic Change

- 'It is catastrophic in the restricted sense of an event producing a subversion of the order or system of things, it is catastrophic in the sense that it is accompanied by feelings of disaster in the participants; it is catastrophic in that it is sudden and violent in an almost physical way' (Bion,p.8:1965)
- **Joy on the birth of her grandchild:** "I was actually really shaken up in my sense of self amazingly it's been quite seismic really.... I was having to make a transition from seeing myself as defined by loss and separation, to actually re configuring myself almost as defined by family and gifts of family and connection."

Pathological disassociation

- **Mac:** “And then I have a very serious mental health problem. Really very serious but part of that I don’t know if I said this last time, was just an unending stream of anxiety and really, really violent images in my head. Sexually really violent images in my head and being really afraid and just not knowing where the fuck this shit was coming from. Walking down the road seeing a woman and having a huge story in my head about how I was going to attack her. Really frightening.”

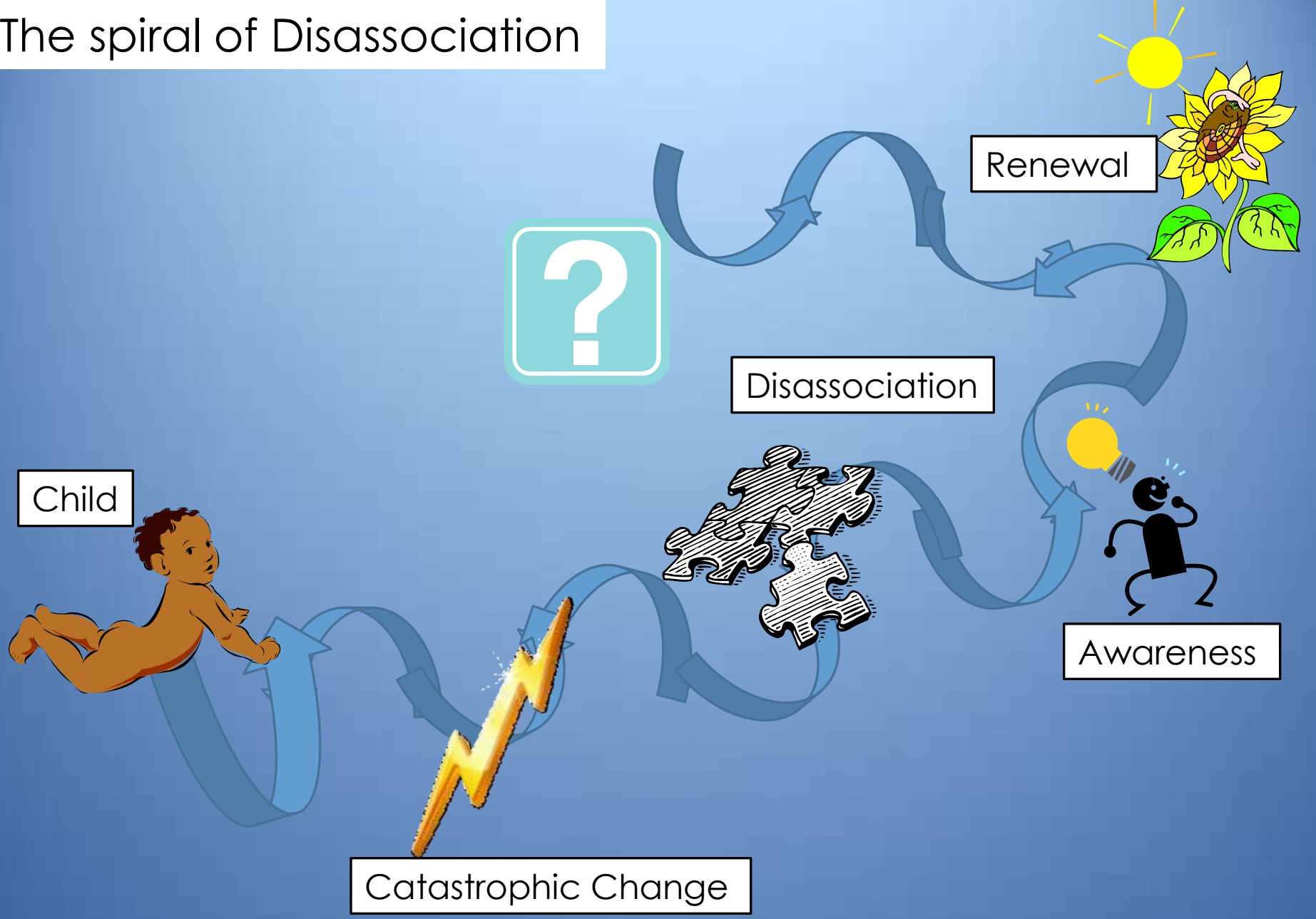
Awareness, what was unconscious becomes conscious

Mac after therapy: “It is only in the last year and a bit that I have felt fully in control of my life. If somebody said do you take responsibility for what you are doing I could say yes. But if someone had asked me at any point previous I would have said no..... there were things that I did that I did not understand why I was doing or what I was doing or what was going on but they weren't my fault but I think I hurt a lot of people. I can not honestly say that I feel personally responsible which is quite a weird place to be. A lot of the things about being human is that you take responsibility for the things that you do but it is very hard to take responsibility for things when you don't feel that you were in control of your own fucking mind. How do you square that?”

Renewal

- They must weave a new self narrative out of the fragments of what was, what might have been and what is (Betty Lifton, 1996)
- **Reggie:** “Talking as we have this afternoon it’s the - a lot of the feelings here have been put away in the corner a bit and the good things have outweighed the bad things. So I mean I can see where you are coming from in that. So in the guilt aspect I probably with positive feelings in me I probably feel less guilty.”
- **Maira:** “Only in the last five years since I have had my records I would say and I am 53 that it has been the greatest period of happiness of my life. And I have only just come to this conclusion talking to you right now, which is that I have assimilated that kind of strong belief that I wasn’t just a wicked unloved person. That they did care about me.:

The spiral of Disassociation



A default defence mechanism

- All of the participants have disassociated throughout their lives
- They all disassociated in the interviews
- I disassociated in the interviews and afterwards
- Irene disassociated recently to protect herself when her partner died suddenly
- Over a life span disassociation is both positive and negative

Summary

- A life span approach that honours participants own constructions, demonstrates how disassociation begins unconsciously as a protective mechanism and then continues to operate unconsciously both positively and negatively as a 'default' defence mechanism
- Awareness makes it conscious and self regulation becomes possible
- A psycho social approach illustrates how events in the external world are experienced through interaction with the internal world and how any catastrophic change, can produce disassociation
- Disassociation can become pathological however with appropriate intervention this can be successfully treated
- We should avoid simple definitions of positive and negative adaptations because the reality of the lived experience is far more complex