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How some children (and their families) cope with living in poverty and how some manage to get out of the poverty trap

ABSTRACT

The study seeks to find out what helps children cope with living in poverty and what helps them get out of the poverty trap. A family resilience framework has been adopted for the study. Twelve young adults, possibly University graduates, will be interviewed. I am interested in finding out what happens to these children. How do they succeed in getting a University education in spite of their disadvantages? What can they teach us professionals from what was helpful for them?

Introduction

In this paper I am interested in learning from the experiences of those children who in spite of the fact that they are brought up in poverty make it to University. A resilience framework will be adopted for the study.

The study, which is still work in progress, is qualitative in nature. Twelve young adults possibly University graduates will be interviewed. I am interested in finding out what happens to these children. How do they succeed in getting a University education in spite of their disadvantages? What can they teach us professionals from what was helpful for them?

Resilience as a Conceptual Framework

In psychology we have inherited a legacy whereby children's well-being is very much based on psychoanalytic and medical conceptual frameworks with an emphasis on diagnosis of psychopathology. From this perspective, the mother was very often blamed for her children's problems. The father was hardly ever mentioned. The solution to children's plights was often that of taking away children from their own parents and placing them in children's homes. We now know that this is not what children really want (ATD 4th world 2004)

The resilience framework which has become an important conceptual framework in mental health theory in the last thirty years (Walsh 2003; Rutter 2000) has provided us with a paradigm shift in the way we work with children and their families. This approach challenges the idea that traumatic experiences are inevitably damaging. Rutter (1999)

noted that irrespective of the risks involved more than half of the children effected by trauma did not suffer from any particular disorder.

The Notion of Resilience

The notion of resilience no longer refers to an innately hardy individual. Rather resilience is very much influenced by peoples' patterns of interpersonal relationships (Rutter 1999) Risk is mitigated by protective factors involving the individual himself, their family and larger systems such as the schools and the community.

Vance and Sanchez (1998) unpack the above statement by pinpointing the variables that are considered as factors enhancing resilience

Resilience Factors

<i>In the Child</i>	<i>In the Family</i>	<i>In the Larger Systems</i>
Positive easy temperament	Lives at home	Adult mentor for Child outside immediate family
Autonomy and independence as a toddler	Secure mother-infant attachment	Extra adult help for caretaker of family
High hopes and expectations for the future	Warm relationship with a parent	Support for child from friends
Internal Locus of Control as a teenager	Inductive, consistent discipline by parents	Support for child from a mentor at school
Interpersonally engaging, "likable"	Perception that parents care	Support for family from church
Empathy	Established routines in the home	Support for family from workplace
Above average intelligence		
Perceived competences		
Sense of humour		
Gets along well with others		
Good reader		
Problem solving skills in school age		

Literature Review about what helped children and families in poverty

Conger and Conger (2002) carried out longitudinal and multi informant research with a cohort of 558 focal youths and their families who were passing through economic adversity. All of the youths were coming from a two parent-family.

Resilience to economic adversity for the youths was promoted by support from parents, siblings and adults outside the family.

Silvia, one of my interviewees, states in her interview that the fact that her older sister used to take her along with her for drama lessons helped. She also felt helped by her teacher who validated her and praised her at school. Silvia did not think her parents were really helpful because they were always fighting but Keith who comes from an Eastern European country and who is studying in Malta cites his parents as being extremely supportive.

Interestingly it is not the economic hardship per se but the hardship related emotions and behaviours of parents that create adversity in the life of children. Silvia says that for her it was not a problem wearing an inexpensive T-shirt if only her mother could tell her something positive like:

‘We can’t afford a branded T-shirt Silvia but you are such a lovely girl, you are like a princess and everything looks perfect on you’

Conger and Conger (2002) confirm previously published research namely that the transitional stages from childhood to adolescence and the early adult years are significant periods of development which may determine one’s sense of personal agency (Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder and Summons 1994; Moffit 1993; Mirowsky and Ross 1989, 2001).

Angela, now 23 points out:

‘Socially life literally sucked because most people tend to befriend you for what you have rather than for what you are as a person. Thank God now I have a couple of real friends who believe in me even if I am naked. As a teenager I found this very hard to cope with and felt emarginated but now that is another time and these times are best forgotten although I must admit that their memory hurts me till this very day.’

Werner 1993, and Werner and Smith 1992 followed the lives of 700 children raised in hardship on the Hawaiian island of Kuwai. He reports that one third were identified at risk. Another third had developed into competent, caring and confident others. They claimed that what helped them were supportive relationships and religious involvement. Despite troubled childhood or a turbulent adolescence, there is still potential for developing resilience later on in life.

Silvia noted how spirituality and the ability to turn to God helped her. Edmond was an altar boy with the Dominicans and they were the ones to help him to come and study at the University of Malta.

The Werner et al study highlights the crucial influence played by relatives, close partners and mentors such as teachers who believed in the potential of these children and encouraged them to make their life a success.

Winfield (1994) focused more on the personal characteristics of successful resilient children living in high poverty areas. As indicated in the Vance and Sanchez table, these children possessed a good repertoire of social skills and enjoyed good relationships with peers. They were also socially sensitive and responsive. They were intelligent, empathic and were endowed with a good sense of humour. They also could rely on their critical problem solving-skills in difficult moments.

Implications for Professionals in the Field

As Walsh (2003) argues, the focus on parental pathology blinded many to the family resources. Very often this is still the case amongst professionals who maybe in their own subtle ways regard parents as incompetent (Abela and Berlioz 2007). And yet good family relationships are vital for ones sense of well-being.

Angela points out *“There is no success story if there is no family to share it with”* She also experienced *“her father’s starvation to feed them”* as extremely helpful.

Silvia who is 29 is continually trying to forge meaningful relationships with her family of origin as this is part of her vision of success.

Angela points out that even in the hardest of times when she had to look after her baby sister, she found the experience edifying. Newman and Blackburn (undated) point out that valued social roles such as the care of siblings enhances resilience. Angela says:

“The fact that I had to look after the house and a baby made me a stronger person decision wise”

The stories that these young adults recount indicate that there is a pressing need to focus more on the strength of sibling relationships. Over time psychologists have tended to focus more on sibling rivalry rather than mutual support (Rowe 2007).

Angela also confessed that *“when people have listened to me genuinely without feeling pity or superior because of my suffering”* that was really helpful. This is in tune with a strength based approach which as Walsh (2003) aptly points out this approach encourages family members to share their stories of adversity often breaking down walls of silence or secrecy around painful or shameful events and fostering mutual support and empathy.

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