

Resilience and the Experience of Loss

A Workshop Facilitated by Elaine Arnold

The aim of the workshop was to examine some of the basic influences on an individual's level of resilience with reference to some women who had migrated from the Caribbean islands to be reunited with their parent/s and sometimes siblings.

It was thought useful to have a working definition of resilience and the group after a lively discussion accepted the following:

“A resilient child (or adult) is one who bounces back having endured adversity or who continues to function reasonably well despite continued exposure to risk.” (Gillian, 1997)

Members of the group were able to identify a number of people they knew to whom this definition was applicable. In the context of Caribbean people, some of the members considered that the early immigrants, who immigrated from the Caribbean to Britain without knowing too much about what life would have been like in a strange country, were resilient. Some of the women present considered themselves resilient, especially those who struggled with bringing up their children in this society where the social climate was so hostile to black and ethnic minority people.

The group discussed three characteristics possessed by a resilient person (Rutter, 1985):

1. A sense of self-esteem and self-confidence.
2. A sense of self-efficacy (a belief in her/his capacity to make a difference).
3. A repertoire of social problem solving approaches.

It was considered a very difficult task to succeed in making a difference that would be beneficial to a majority of black and ethnic people who struggle with poverty and whose children are underachieving at school. This is particularly distressing to a number of parents who had come to Britain to work so that their children would be well-educated and escape from the poverty trap. It was therefore necessary for groups such as this to implement some of the ideas discussed at a conference to help parents to provide an emotionally secure base for their children and so build their self-esteem and self-confidence.

The group spent some time discussing whether the origin of resilience was social or constitutional. Some people felt that there are individuals who are born with the temperament which facilitated the struggle against the odds and allowed them to 'bounce back'. But all agreed that loving care given to children in their early years was indispensable for building trust in themselves and helping them to be able to engage in relationships with others who they felt able to trust.

In researching the reunions of women who had been left by their parents for long periods, I had found that some of them as children seemed to have had the capacity to transcend the adverse conditions of the traumatic reunion. Describing their resilient stance, those women attributed their survival to their ability to recall the memories of how they were cared and loved by their carers during their early lives. They also felt that in spite of time and distance they were still securely attached to their

grandmothers and other members of the extended family. They believed that these carers would have wanted them to succeed in their education and in life generally and the knowledge of this motivated them to do so. Their carers had inculcated in them the necessity to be independent and even though they had come to live with their mothers/parents, they had not forgotten those early lessons.

When these women had acknowledged the disappointment of not meeting replicas of their grandmothers or other carers, and when they realised that the siblings born in England seemed to be preferred, they made a conscious decision to leave home. They found places where they could feel secure and independent. Some chose to train as nurses and live in nurses' hostels, others stayed with friends. Those who were able to afford rented housing lived alone or with partners.

Besides the women's own inner strengths, there were other factors which they highlighted as contributing to their resilience and survival:

1. A sound and satisfactory relationship with a sibling(s) with whom they had shared the separation/reunion experience.
2. A satisfactory school experience with good relationships with peers and teachers.
3. Employment which they had found quite easily, and with a regular income, gave them a sense of security.
4. Further Education which enhanced their prospects of employment in middle class professions.
5. Maintenance of contact with the carers, e.g., grandparents and other members of the extended family, to whom they had become attached during their early lives.
6. As they matured, the practice of religion mainly in non-conformist black-led churches where they experienced a strong social network. This provided them with a sense of belonging which was often missing in the established churches and sometimes within their own families. They had faith in God and believed that Divine Guidance would help them to manage their lives.

The above factors helped to boost the women's self-esteem and self-confidence and they became independent and self-actualising in spite of the hostile environment of the wider society and for some the lack of support from their families.

Some of the women possessed a keen sense of humour: they were temperamentally easy going and had developed strategies for dealing with problems when they occurred in order to minimise frustration and stress in their lives.

These women seemed to be fitting examples of resilient persons who 'bounced back' having endured adversity whilst growing up in a new and strange environment and who continued 'to function reasonably well despite continued exposure to risks'. Many members of the group recognised some these factors as applicable to their lives as well.

References

Gillian, R. (1997) 'Beyond Permanence? The Importance of Resilience in Child Placement Practice and Planning'. *Adoption and Fostering Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 21, no. 1.

Rutter, M. (1985). 'Resilience in Face of Adversity: Protective Factors and Resistance to Psychiatric Disorder'. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 147, pp. 598-611.