Resilience in Individuals Who Have Experienced Emotional Abuse as Children

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In the year 2015 alone, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported an estimated 683,000 children were the victims of abuse or neglect. Studies have found that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as emotional abuse or neglect, are common among school age children with 1 in 4 school age children reporting exposure to at least one traumatic event and 1 in 2 children reporting two or more (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2013). As more research is completed on trauma, such as abuse, there is an increasing amount of knowledge surrounding the adverse outcomes associated with it. In the academic discussion on emotional abuse or neglect of children, there is a lack of research on this population who have also demonstrated their ability to 'bounce back' in a sense, or be resilient. This study seeks to investigate one subset of child abuse - emotional abuse. Children who have been emotionally abused still have the potential to be resilient, despite having previously endured many hardships. The purpose of this study is to investigate what protective factors aided three individuals who have been emotionally abused to be or to become, resilient.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional Abuse (EA) falls under the broad umbrella of trauma, along with other forms of childhood maltreatment such as sexual or physical abuse, or neglect. The CDC defines EA as "behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional wellbeing," (2017) such as name calling, threatening violence, or purposefully exposing to violence, shaming, or withholding love. Of the 683,000 victims of child abuse or neglect, only about a quarter of the reported cases were of physical or sexual abuse; the remaining were victims of neglect or other forms of abuse, such as emotional abuse. Moreover, Dias, Sales, Hessen and Kleber (2015) found that emotional abuse

frequently overlapped with different kinds of childhood maltreatment, such as neglect, or physical abuse.

EA poses a unique set of challenges to development and the potential for resilience. Powers, Ressler, and Bradley (2009) found that reports of EA and emotional neglect were stronger predictors of adult depressive symptoms than physical or sexual abuse. Psychological maltreatment (which the authors operationally defined largely as emotional abuse), was found to be the most frequent form of abuse and the strongest predictor of internalizing behaviors in comparison to sexual or physical abuse (Spinazolla et al., 2014). The literature on EA presents an exhaustive list of adverse outcomes such as poor relationship adjustment and functioning, increased suicidality, greater externalizing behaviors, reports of lower self-esteem, and less than optimal cognitive development (Riggs, Cusimano, & Bensen, 2011; Yoshihama, Horrocks, & Kamano, 2009; Miller, Jenness, & Oppenheimer, 2017; Trickett, Kim, & Prindle, 2011).

White, English, Thompson and Roberts (2016), explored emotional maltreatment in a high-risk youth sample. The authors selected the population for this study from a sample of children who were identified as at risk for maltreatment or those who had been referred to child protective services for maltreatment. Participants completed self reports of emotional maltreatment and professionals completed official reports of emotional maltreatment which were compared. When controlling for race and gender, subsets of emotional maltreatment, such as "failure to provide psychological safety," and "threats to security," predicted a number of unfavorable outcomes. Some of these outcomes included a range of trauma symptoms, such as anger, depression, avoidance, and dissociation. Additionally, different subsets of emotional

maltreatment also linked to increased suicidal thoughts, arrests, illegal drug use, and alcohol abuse.

White et al. (2016) found that emotional maltreatment may be underreported for two main reasons. Firstly, many of the youth in the sample experienced other kinds of abuse and neglect which presented a greater immediate danger and might have overshadowed the severity of the emotional maltreatment. Secondly, unlike physical abuse, where there may be visible harm to a child, emotional abuse does not leave any outward marks, which may make it harder to identify, and thereby, more difficult to report.

Resilience

Both communities and individuals face times of high stress or challenges and must exhibit a level of resilience to 'bounce back' in the aftermath of trying times. Although the precise definition of resilience is still unclear (Masten, 2014), what is clear is that resilience denotes success and positive adaptation in the face of adverse circumstances. Despite the complex definition of resilience, resilience is not equated to the idea of invincibility or invulnerability and is not static (Waller, 2001). Rather, both individual and social factors are already at play in people's lives that can be identified and used to bolster resilience (Masten, 2014; Waller, 2001).

Personal Factors that Promote Resilience

Just as outcomes to adversity can vary significantly from one person to another, so too do the common protective factors that promote, and the challenges that hinder resilience. Protective factors that improve chances for resilience are consistent throughout the literature. Following a potentially traumatic event (PTE), younger adults (18-24) were more likely to have PTSD

symptoms and be less resilient than adults over the age of 65 (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2007). Additionally, Bonanno et al. found the presence of a chronic disease to be associated with a reduced likelihood of resilience after a PTE. Despite these challenges, personal factors, such as the tendency to worry less and increased optimism, were related to lower levels of behavioral problems with adolescents who have been sexually victimized (Perez-Gonzalez, Guilera, Pereda, & Jarne, 2017).

Personal growth initiatives, such as the ability to create goals or plans to achieve self-improvement or promote successful growth, were shown to be a protective factor in a genocide-affected population (Blackie, Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Jayawickreme, 2015). Personal growth initiatives were linked to lower levels of functional impairment, which in turn reduced symptoms of distress related to PTSD and depression. These findings suggest that personal growth initiatives require individuals to have an adaptive mindset and harness a sense of agency and confidence in their ability to positively shape their life circumstances.

Social Factors that Promote Resilience

Ecological theory suggests that individuals do not live in a bubble, and the impact of the environment around them can have as much of a potential for positive impact as it does negative. Powers et al. found that perceived friend support acted as a buffer to depressive symptoms associated with childhood maltreatment (2009). Social support, or perceived social support, was found to be a predictor of decreased PTSD symptoms and a higher likelihood of resilience with those who have experienced a PTE (Bonanno et al., 2007). Moreover, an ability to seek social support, which can result in using social relationships as a way of managing stress, was

associated with decreasing the risk for psychopathology with adolescents (Halevi, Djalovski, Vengrober, & Feldman , 2016).

If abuse is present in the family, this may make it difficult to compartmentalize the abuse from the perception of family support (Powers et al., 2009); however, if it is possible to do so, perceived family support is associated with increased levels of resilience and academic effort (Wu, Tsang, & Ming, 2014). This implies that positive relationships within the family system still have the potential to serve as protective factors despite the fact that other relationships in the family may be abusive. Additionally, communication styles within families affected the risk of developing PTSD and symptom severity, with open family communication serving as a protective factor in decreasing risk for PTSD and symptom severity compared to problem family communication (Acuña & Kataoka, 2017). If abuse has happened in a family, an essential step to resilience may be allowing open communication as it plays a role in the relationships within that family and the perception of social support within that family.

Methods

Procedure

Research articles for this literature review were obtained through the Chapman University Library website using the database host ERIC-EBSO. Commonly used words or phrases for the searches included, "trauma," "resilience," "emotional abuse," and "outcomes."

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to gather information for the present study. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes to an hour and was conducted face-to-face in a place of the interviewee's choosing. Participants were shown the interview questions before beginning the interview process after providing verbal consent to being audio

recorded and participating in the study. Additionally, each participant was informed that identifying information would be redacted. After the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were later replayed. Quotes related to resilience were transcribed to identify the common themes of protective factors in the participant's accounts.

In this study, resilience was defined by having completed a Bachelor's degree, having a steady job, and having close friendships or romantic relationships.

Participants

This study consisted of three participants - two males and one female. Participants were referred through mutual contacts in response to a Facebook post inquiring about volunteers who fit the criteria. Participants in this study identified as having both experienced emotional abuse as a child and resilience in emerging adulthood and adulthood.

Thomas, the first participant, is a 24 year old, White male. Thomas grew up with his two brothers, a sister and his mother in Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia. Thomas shared that he had a tough childhood, in spite of the fact that he currently has a successful professional life and healthy relationship with his girlfriend. At the age of five, Thomas witnessed his biological father attempt to kill his mother by repeatedly hitting his mother over the head with a log. His father also threw Thomas' older sister through a glass door and punched his older brother in the face on many occasions. Thomas' mother became withdrawn and he often felt unloved by his mother due to her words or actions after his father left. Moreover, Thomas witnessed his brother die of an overdose and his mother's response to discovering the body.

Thomas stated that there were many times when he reached out to his mother, especially after the death of his brother (when his other older siblings brought more drugs into the home),

but she continuously overlooked his emotional needs. At times she gave him the silent treatment for weeks on end. In addition, Thomas shared that she would disappear for weeks, and upon returning home, she would tell him that she had "gone on vacation." Thomas stated that his dad was "always trying to buy [his] love" and would emotionally confuse him by telling Thomas that he was the only one in the family who loved his father.

Thomas went on to complete university in Pennsylvania and then moved out to California where he has been working as a traveling salesman for a lighting company, despite experiencing many adversities as a child. He expressed that he is working hard to pay off his student loans; and, once this debt has cleared, hopes to start his own business with the knowledge he gained from his current job.

Bobby, the second participant, is a 22 year old White male. Bobby grew up outside of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, along with his three siblings and his mother. At the age of nine, Bobby called the police on his father after his father beat him for defending his sister, who the father had also been beating. Subsequently, Bobby's father went to jail for these incidents, among other crimes. Bobby stated that "it wasn't always safe feeling" when his father was home.

Bobby's father had a sporadic presence throughout Bobby's childhood. This inconsistency was only supplemented by Bobby's father's criticism that Bobby was a "bad son" that he never wanted in his life. His father also repeatedly told Bobby he was to blame for his trips to jail. Bobby sometimes felt confused and upset when his father would take him out on trips, only for his father to then not speak to him for months after.

Additionally, Bobby felt his mother had also dismissed his emotional needs. He conceded that she did not mean to do so; however, she could not be there for him in the ways that he would have liked as she was working to support their family. Bobby now works for a biomedical engineering company and moved to California after completing his undergraduate degree in Pennsylvania. He has recently moved into a new home and is excited about the opportunity to live with his new roommates in the upcoming year.

The last participant, Chloe, is a 53 year old Asian American woman who lives with her husband of thirty years and their three sons in Southern California. She works as a nurse in a GI clinic and is currently taking additional courses in Nursing, even though she already has her Bachelors of Science in Nursing. Chloe disclosed that she endured many kinds of abuse from her father as she was growing up. Chloe's mother left Chloe and her two younger sisters with their father, who became abusive to all three girls when Chloe was eight years old. Chloe grew up nervous around her father because he would frequently yell at her for not "showing [him] how much she appreciated [him]," and everything he did for the family; he also called her names such as "whore" or "slut." Moreover, he was so strict with the girls that they were often too afraid to even speak to each other when he was home.

When Chloe and her sisters reached their teenage years, their father became sexually abusive. In addition to the sexual abuse, he continued to manipulate Chloe by making her "feel worthless." Due to the environment at home, Chloe shared that she was not especially close to her sisters, and despite the fact that they had all been sexually abused by their father, they did not know about the others' abuse until after they had all left home. Even though Chloe was subjected to an exceptionally abusive home, she succeeded in completing an undergraduate

degree in Nursing (which she financed with her savings) and shared that she has a healthy and happy relationship with her husband. She hopes to provide a life for her three children that are void of the adversities she faced as a child.

Findings

Throughout the interviews, the participants were asked to describe the factors that they believed aided them in becoming successful despite experiences of emotional abuse in their childhood. The most common themes identified by the participants in this study were Motivation to Succeed, Close Friendships and a Sense of Community.

Motivation to Succeed

When asked what led each of the participants to be successful, all three participants shared that they were motivated to accomplish the goals of the vision they had for their future. Success was independently defined by each participant but typically revolved around the idea of leading stable and healthy lives. For Chloe, success was shaped by the fact that she wanted a happy and healthy family and a supportive husband. She described that her sisters, who also endured years of abuse, "kind of repeated patterns" of abuse in their romantic relationships and "[she] didn't want that." Chloe did not want to be in a situation in which she relied on a man so decided to work in sales during her twenties to pay for her way through nursing school, despite the fact that she "married into a pretty good family."

Both Thomas and Bobby expressed concerns that the goals they envision for themselves have been placed on pause due to their student loans; nonetheless, Thomas shared that he ultimately made choices over his life that would allow him to "support a family and live a happy life." Despite Bobby hoping for a closer relationship with his mother during his childhood, he

expressed that seeing her work so hard while he was growing up, was a driving force in his vision for a better life. He stated that he, too, wanted to "be financially able to help people." Bobby said, "I never knew what kind of business I wanted to have, but I always knew I wanted to be my own boss."

Blackie et al., (2015) describe personal growth initiatives as the ability to create goals or plans to promote successful growth. Thomas captured this idea when he said:

> I taught myself work ethic and time management because whatever I'm doing, I
> want to do it well and I want to be the best that I can be at that, as far as my career
> goes. I want to make it to the top of wherever I am. If I'm comfortable at where
> I'm at, then I'm not working as hard as I could be.

Thomas saw that his brother and sister struggled with drugs from an early age. Even though he was forced to smoke marijuana at the age of six, he was able to "see where they went wrong with drugs… and realized not to do it." For him to be successful, Thomas believed that he had choices:

> I can make decisions and end up there too, or I can make my own decisions and
> do my own thing.

Ultimately, Thomas decided to continuously do his own thing and that realizing his desire "to be just successful and happy" has pushed him through the challenges he has experienced in life.

Bobby had a similar thought process to Thomas and believed that "you just have to tell yourself that if you want to do it, you can do it" which motivated him to continue through education. In high school, Bobby worked three jobs, and kept good grades but was rejected from his top choice university. Despite this, he knew that going to university and having a stable

income would provide him with the "safety net" that he wanted in life. Bobby shared that he

knew a successful life was in his grips, and that being financially stable would help him reach his

goals because:

> Once you know that you're going to work hard and have a safety net, you can
>
> catch yourself and be fine.

Like Thomas, Bobby believed that having a stable financial life would be beneficial in the reality

of a successful future. Both of these participants took active steps in completing plans to help

them reach their goals of eventually running their own businesses and supporting their families.

To use Bobby's words, it is important to "become the manager of yourself to help you be the

person you want to be." Chloe took steps in allowing herself to be financially independent and

focusing on having a healthy relationship with her husband to model these behaviors for her

children.

Close Friendships

Peers of the participants had an essential role in helping them be successful, regardless of

the fact that the participants choose not to disclose their experiences of emotional abuse with

their friends. Friendships shared a number of important functions for these participants. For

Thomas, his friendships allowed him to have a physically safe place away from violence or drugs

in the home. Thomas stated, that he "had a bunch of friends and basically lived in their homes

… to stay away from the drugs."

In addition to this, friendships allowed Thomas, Bobby, and Chloe to feel close to people

who treated them kindly, which contrasted to many of the relationships they experienced in their

homes. Chloe shared that she "had friends throughout her life" and that she was "fortunate

enough to be surrounded by a lot of friends." She recalled that she never had trouble making friends when she was growing up, whereas her sister was always lonely. Halevi et al. (2016) note the importance of having the ability to seek out friends in reducing adverse mental health outcomes in adolescents. Chloe attributed the fact that her sister did not have friends to the fact that she is currently engaged in an emotionally and financially abusive relationship; Chloe stated that this was something she "wouldn't put up with."

Bobby and Thomas attributed much of their happiness in their childhood years to the families of their friends. Thomas recalled:

I had that support network of really, really great people that were awesome to me.

They gave me love.

At home, Thomas expressed that he was "starved of [love]" as a child and that when he was not able to get this love from his family, he acted out. Over the years spent at his friends' houses, "other moms were [his] social support." Bobby's experiences with his friend, Jay, and Jay's family was similar to that of Thomas' in that Bobby shared:

There are many people who helped me get to where I'm at, and if it wasn't for

them, I wouldn't be here today. They gave me a lot of mental strength. They

were the people I went to if I needed someone - they were always there. Jay, he

understood what I was going through.

The participants disclosed that they were close to many of their family members and cared deeply for them, despite living in abusive homes. Chloe, Bobby, and Thomas shared an additional common theme in that the abuse was not talked about in the family and was, in a sense, swept under the rug. This put a strain on the relationships within their families at the time,

which led them to seek out other forms of companionship. These other relationships, in the form of close friendships, were described as a factor that aided them in their journey to overcome adversity.

Sense of Community

For the participants in this study, having a team or community in which they felt welcome and appreciated was important in their resilience. Bobby and Thomas were involved in team sports during their high school years; Bobby was on the wrestling team, and Thomas played football. For both of these men, the sports team gave them a physical outlet for their stress, and for Thomas, being on the football team "created structure and challenged [him]." Moreover, they both shared that being a part of a team gave them confidence as they received praise from their teammates and their coaches. For Bobby, being on the wrestling team was an important step in feeling accomplished and appreciated. Bobby stated:

Joining the wrestling team - that was my first sense of community. I won at two

wrestling matches I wasn't supposed to win. It was just a really good feeling

'cause I earned that and no-one gave it to me. I got the team award for 'heart,'

and I used that money to buy myself a laptop.

This was especially important to Bobby as he had teachers in high school who told him he did not have any chance at becoming an engineer. However, he realized he had agency when he joined the wrestling team, and his community supported his decisions to make the best out of his life.

Being on the football team for Thomas proved to be both physically and mentally challenging, which was beneficial for him. He relayed that putting his body through extensive

physical tests, gave him the "ability to deal with stressful situations and how to cope with them."

Additionally, for Thomas, "being proud of overcoming extremely stressful situations has really

helped [him] grow as a person." He attributes learning these coping skills to being part of a team.

Chloe relied on a different community to aid her in her times of need - the Church. She

stated that she started attending her local church in her twenties and that it "definitely gave [her]

more strength." Chloe attended groups and events held at her church, in addition to the religious

services. On these groups, Chloe recounted:

> The groups really helped me a lot. Getting together with some of those people
>
> and being able to talk about what has happened to you. Just the fact that you can
>
> cry together; things like that can give you strength.

Bobby shared a similar sentiment about having people in the community who understand

the impact abuse can have and that having a community by your side can be especially

helpful "once you realize you're not the only one."

Discussion

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recognizes emotional neglect

as a subset of trauma. NASP explicitly notes that school psychologists have a responsibility to

ensure the safety and support of children for two main reasons. Firstly, trauma is common, and

secondly, children spend a lot of time in schools and under the care and supervision of

practitioners. NASP also shares the importance of looking for indicators of abuse and reporting

any suspected cases.

Despite this, all of the participants in the study shared that throughout their time in

education, no teachers, school psychologists or other professionals, reached out or recognized the

signs that these individuals were being abused at home. As previously mentioned, physical

abuse has more visible signs to the naked eye, so may make it easier to identify than emotional

abuse, for instance. White et al. suggests that there may be an inherent flaw in the tools used to

recognize signs of emotional abuse and that this accounts for the discrepancy in self-reports of

emotional abuse, and professional reports of EA (2016).

For many children, emotional abuse may frequently overlap with other forms of abuse, as

it did for the participants in this study (Dias et al., 2015). There is a need to find ways of

highlighting the severity of emotional abuse as it can be overshadowed by what children, and

practitioners, may see as more pressing due to the somewhat subjective nature of emotional

abuse in comparison to physical or sexual abuse. Moreover, all of the participants in this study

shared that did not disclose their abuse with friends or others in their life until after they had left

high school. Without school practitioners being able to recognize the signs of emotional abuse,

it is possible that children who are being emotionally abused may continue through school

without beneficial, and arguably essential, mental health services. In light of the fact that

children may not disclose emotional abuse, and that the signs related to it may be difficult to

recognize, there is an increased need to find more effective ways of identifying emotional abuse

or maltreatment, even in the presence of other forms of child abuse.

In the discussion on turning points, Thomas shared that he had a teacher who encouraged

him to change his behaviors and use his influence in the class "for good." From that point, he

had a significant change in behaviors in school and stopped acting out, as he described that this

was the first time "anyone had acknowledged [him] for something good." Thomas demonstrates

the ability that school practitioners can have in serving as role models and positive influencers in

children's lives. Teachers report a need for increased technical skills and professional

development for working with children who have experienced trauma such as abuse (Alisic,

2012). By providing teachers with the skills they need to work with these populations, they can

be influential in noticing signs of abuse, but may also be beneficial in promoting resilience.

Future Directions for Research

The findings of this study suggest that there is a dire need for research on the topic of

emotional abuse. The circumstances that encompass emotional abuse are severe and have the

potential to create lifelong negative effects in the absence of supportive systems. A potential

area for research in this topic is exploring specific protective factors that have been found to

bolster resilience with those who have experienced emotional abuse as children. By identifying

the strongest predictors of resilience within this population, school psychologists and other

school practitioners can provide access to appropriate resources and promote skill development

linked to those protective factors for children who have suffered emotional abuse.

This study found that many of the participants noted a strong motivation to succeed, in

spite of many early challenges. Research should investigate the impact of interventions that

promote motivation and skills related to personal growth that aid in resilience. These skills may

be particularly useful for youth who are experiencing emotional abuse or have experienced it, as

well as the general population in schools.

In addition, this study found that positive relationships, typically close friends, played a

significant role in resilience. As the participants noted that school practitioners were not

especially useful or helpful to them in their most desperate times of need, it would be important

to investigate ways to improve relationships between school practitioners and students.

Teachers, school psychologists, and other school staff may have the potential to serve as role models that provide supportive turning points for children. Further research could narrow relationships gaps between school officials and students to aid in promoting resilience in youth who have been abused.

Both school-wide changes at the Tier 1 level, and more focused interventions (at the Tier 2 level) could be implemented to provide sufficient aid to youth who experience adverse events. It is clear that this topic cannot be ignored as many studies have found that trauma is common amongst school age children. School psychologists need to take an active role in investigating the needs of all students and in locating and developing resources and interventions that are necessary for fostering resilience.

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