

**Bright Stories from Dark Places:  
Celebrating Glimpses of Resilience in  
Vulnerable Young People's Lives**

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- We may assume that bright stories happen in bright places
- And that dark places lead to dark scripts
- And that, in turn, dark scripts lead on to dark stories



- What helps vulnerable young people do better than expected? What helps them change the presumed script?
- What helps promote resilience in a vulnerable young person (or, in some cases, groups of young people)?

## Resilience

- Doing better than expected under difficult circumstances ***over time***
- [‘True’ resilience enables transformative change. *Doing well* for shorter periods may also help in getting to deeper change]

## Bright Stories from Dark Places

- Am suggesting that stories of resilience can be seen as stories of 'resistance'
- Resisting the apparent destiny contained in the apparent (dark) script
- [Broader sense of resistance than that used by Michael Ungar when pointing out the possible resilience value of challenging behaviour]

## Resilience *processes*

- *Resisting* the 'script' in certain episodes
  - Doing better than expected in one or more periods on the journey or trajectory of development
  - for example for a certain spell in school
  - [but no guarantee gains will endure]

## Resilience *processes*

- *Re-writing* (at least part of) the script
  - Doing better than expected *in an enduring way* in young adulthood in the face of adversity (for example, getting good final school results, getting a job)
  - Doing better in one or more domains
  - ‘Re-writing’ based on the fruits of past and present resistance (and on the support of others)

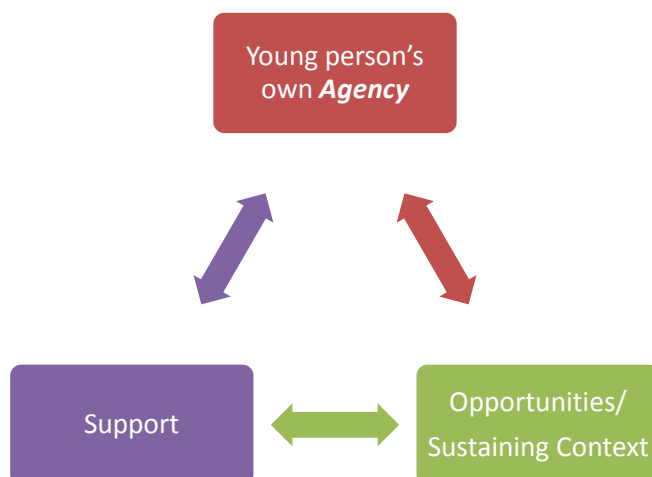
## Resilient *outcomes*

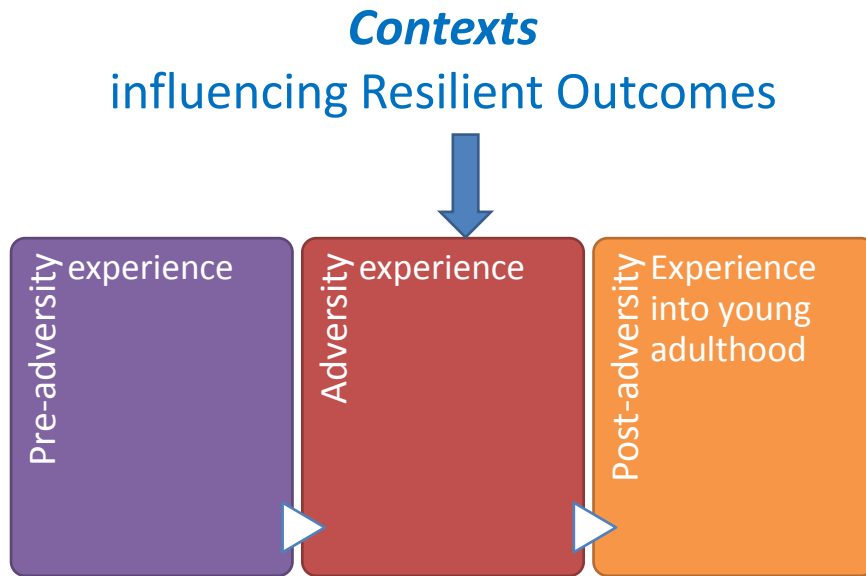
- Enduring change of the script may arise from the cumulative effect of many episodes of resistance
- But also from a supportive and sustaining context (Gilligan, 2010)

## Reflection on 'resistances'

- The efforts may not be pre-meditated, conscious or coherent
- Their full meaning or significance may only be clear in retrospect
- Many possible influences over script:
  - Individual
  - Parents and others
  - Community and cultural values
  - Economic opportunity

## Key ingredients of Resilience





## Impact of adversity

- Duration and intensity related to mitigating and aggravating influences in the three contexts
  - Pre-adversity
  - Adversity
  - Post-adversity
- [Implies chronic adversity most challenging]

## Some Bright Stories from Dark Places

### War Affected children and young people

- *'I heard the war in my mother's womb. I was born into war, I lived amidst war in the jungle, I studied in the war and got my examination results in the jungle, but I never gave up. I studied in the light of a candle in the jungle. Today I'm a nurse. I wanted to be a doctor, but I'm glad I have at least come close to my goal. I know I can achieve something in life.'* (Young Sinhalese woman caught up in war in Sri Lanka, quoted in Fernando, 2012)
- **[Reflection:** support of family and culture implicit, alongside daily efforts at resistance]

- The young woman's resistance is impressive, but she was not acting alone – there was a supportive ecology
- 'our focus needs to shift from changing individuals to making social and physical ecologies facilitative' (Ungar, 2011)
- Parents and family may be an important part of those supportive ecologies

‘.....a persistent heart...’  
- in the face of adversity

- ‘The other thing that makes children [persevere] is parental advice. When a child is well advised and well treated, then he grows up with a persistent heart’. (Father, Kigali) (Betancourt, 2012)
- [a wonderful phrase that captures so much]

## Vietnamese Vegetable Seller

Young woman with serious physical disability

Got job on leaving school with good results

But company closes some years later

Age 19, no job, no income, no prospects, bleak future  
- Facing many economic and cultural barriers



## Vietnamese Vegetable Seller

Wants to start own vegetable shop – gets loan from various family members

Sells at local market thanks to help of locals who assist her in transporting produce

Also sells from shop in own home (photo)

Raised three sons as single parent



## Vietnamese Vegetable Seller - Reflections

- \* Young woman's own *agency*
- \* Support from family (loan)
- \* Support from community (ongoing practical – transport etc)

All led to transformative change in her life and in the course of her life

Her business venture shaped enduring change in her life

- Reared three sons on her own
- Earned respect of community

But support also necessary for her idea and commitment to bear fruit (!)



## Stories involving other helpful adults

- In some cases, young people may find a connection with another adult (not a parent) who proves very influential
- They may sometimes find these in dark places

## Committed Adults in Dark Places

- ['Gilbert' (now aged 70) was sent as a boy to reform school, and assigned to electrical workshop where he met Jack who was in charge] '.....he loved amateur radio. And he got me interested in radio and electrical stuff and things of that nature.....He saw the potentials in me. He saw I enjoyed electricity. I enjoyed radio and stuff like that. He took me under his wing. And I thought an awful lot of this guy in a short ten months I worked with him. He was a prince.....I prepared my whole life in ten months to do something.....

## Continued....

..Think about it. Those ten months were crucial in my life. Because they turned me around. [Name of prison] turned me around. Jack turned me around. Jack was a humanitarian and cared for me as an individual. Let's get down to brass tacks. What if Jack wasn't there? What if I wasn't offered the opportunity?.....He treated me right. As a matter of fact, after I left [name of prison] year after year on a yearly basis I would take my wife and kids, we'd drive all the way to [name of prison] to see Jack' ('Gilbert' in Laub and Sampson, 2003, p. 141

## Reflections on relationship with Jack – the ‘prince’

- Sharing enthusiasm
- Quality of relationship
- Long term legacy – implicit impact on other parts of life
- Relationship over time with Jack - interacting with rest of sustaining context: stable family life, work, etc

## Helpful adults who emerge unexpectedly

- Sometimes young people may find special connections with adults who have a formal helping role in their lives
- But there may also be adults who emerge more organically. They act *informally* but may play a very helpful role in the changing of scripts - sometimes with whole groups, rather than just with individuals

## A businesswoman in Addis Ababa

- 'Zemi [a business woman who supports recovering prostitutes] asked me to list the names of commercial sex workers who would like to quit like me. She gives training in hair dressing to those who do not want to enroll in school. She helps them in getting jobs, too. Every night, I contact those girls whom I knew and those willing to change, and I give the list to Zemi. ....So far, I changed about 28 children. Now, all are not in the business [sex]: some are trained by Zemi, others are students (Zuriash).
- from Gebre Yntiso. et al., (2009) report  
[http://www.oakfind.org/sites/default/files/Resilience%20Report%20Ethiopia\\_0.pdf](http://www.oakfind.org/sites/default/files/Resilience%20Report%20Ethiopia_0.pdf)
- Report prepared for OAK Foundation Bamboo Project three country study on resilience in children and young people with experience of / exposure to sexual abuse / exploitation

- In some cases, whole communities may act collectively to create a more positive and supportive ecology
- One example comes from First Nations tribes in Canada

## Community Mental Health in Canada



- Rate of youth suicide among aboriginal young people is inversely related to the level of cultural continuity achieved within their tribe (Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde, 2007).
- Rate of youth suicide almost zero in tribes retaining command of their traditional language

- In some cases, communities may serve as a resource for the young person
- In other cases, they act as a barrier through, for example, stigmatising attitudes
- In such cases, young people may need other actors to play a part in finding a positive way forward

## Life after Sexual Abuse

- Two young women in their teens from an Asian village
- Had been sexually abused over time
- This abuse meant that they were highly stigmatised in their home community
- a bleak life before them?

How could they find work and more positive status in their community?

- Social worker from NGO which offered them respite care paid for them to do a photography course so they could set up a local photography business in their local community
- This would be a needed service that people would use

## Lessons

- Simple step of linking the young women into the photography course opened up life changing opportunity
  - Not therapy, but practical help to gain a viable economic and social role
  - Social worker did not have to carry any burden of support long term
- 
- Helped the two young women to find solution to problems of stigma and no income
  - Used knowledge of need and context, to make an intervention that **promoted resilience** and changed lives

## Finding the right balance between agency and support

A woman takes baskets to sell in a market in Sarlingyi township, Burma) Photograph: Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/gallery/2013/mar/16/photography-one-direction/#?picture=405670120&index=19>



## Key reflections

- Learn from every story
- Intertwining of key influences
- Learn from the logic of the actors
- Implications for how to help – value of informal support: ‘facilitative ecology’ (Ungar)
- Change happens at different levels
- Value of new beginnings
- Not assuming the worst – living with ‘reasonable hope’ (Weingarten, 2010)

## What supports resilience?

- Opportunities to exercise agency
- Dealing with challenges
- ‘mental phenomena – ideas, attributions, self-reflection and planning’
- Facilitative support
- (points above derived from Rutter, 2012)
- Young person’s positive connections in everyday life (Williams & Nelson-Gardell, 2012)

## No rigid formula in promoting resilience



Young people may find meaning and support:

‘.....Wherever life pours ordinary plenty’

(from *Advent*, poem by Patrick Kavanagh, Irish poet)

**‘Many pathways to good outcomes’ – Many ways to reach the light**



Dark Places do not always  
lead to Dark Stories

‘life’s ordinary plenty’?



- Sierra Leone
- Children affected by war
- 90% found to display few mental health difficulties
- 10% do so – linked to ‘loss of a caregiver, family abuse and neglect, and community stigma’ (Betancourt et al, 2013)
- Findings raise many interesting issues!

## Messages for Research

- Seek to fully understand the sources and dynamics of resilience
  - Seek to understand the logic of actor-in-context
  - Pursue the unexpected
    - Beware the dangers of orthodoxy
    - Avoid ready assumptions (those of the researcher or others )
    - Welcome challenges – the Betancourt findings in Sierra Leone
- 
- Remember the hidden cases, the silenced voices
    - those not in the sample, not in the data
  - Conduct multiple observations *over time*
  - *Check that we are using the right (overall) research questions and the right mix of research design*

- Thank You!

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