"ECLECTIC RESILIENCE" IN CHILDHOOD: INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH & PRACTICE

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Childhood Resilience: Interdisciplinary Research & Practice

- *Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, I provide new ways of viewing childhood resilience, coproduced with children from marginalised and displaced communities.*

- *<u>Aim:</u> To centralise children's meaning-making and validate voices and agency when it comes to (re)conceptualising and (re)defining childhood resilience and wellbeing.*

- *Implications for theory and practice.*

Resilience

- Resilience, defined as "*positive adaptation despite adversity*", first used by Werner in the 1970s, has become a popular term in research and practice with disadvantaged groups, centralising the role of 'positive emotions', 'successful traits', and coping mechanisms in adapting to life despite great odds (Werner & Smith, 2002, p. 3; see also Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2015; Rutter, 2012).

- Moreover, the phenomenon of resilience has been adopted in everyday language with a focus on '*making people more resilient*' or the '*need*' to become more resilient.

Revisiting Resilience

- Yet, 'resilience' has also provoked scepticism, and at present there is ***little consensus on its application or agreement on its role in explanations, models and theories.***

- Some of this is linked to the fact that **key terms**, such as **'success'** and **'positive adaptations'** are <u>*not clearly defined*</u>, other than being **measured in terms of education success, an 'ability to achieve goals' and having a 'positive attitude**', to name a few, whilst ***'resistance to change' and 'disordered behaviours' are equated with lacking in resilience.***
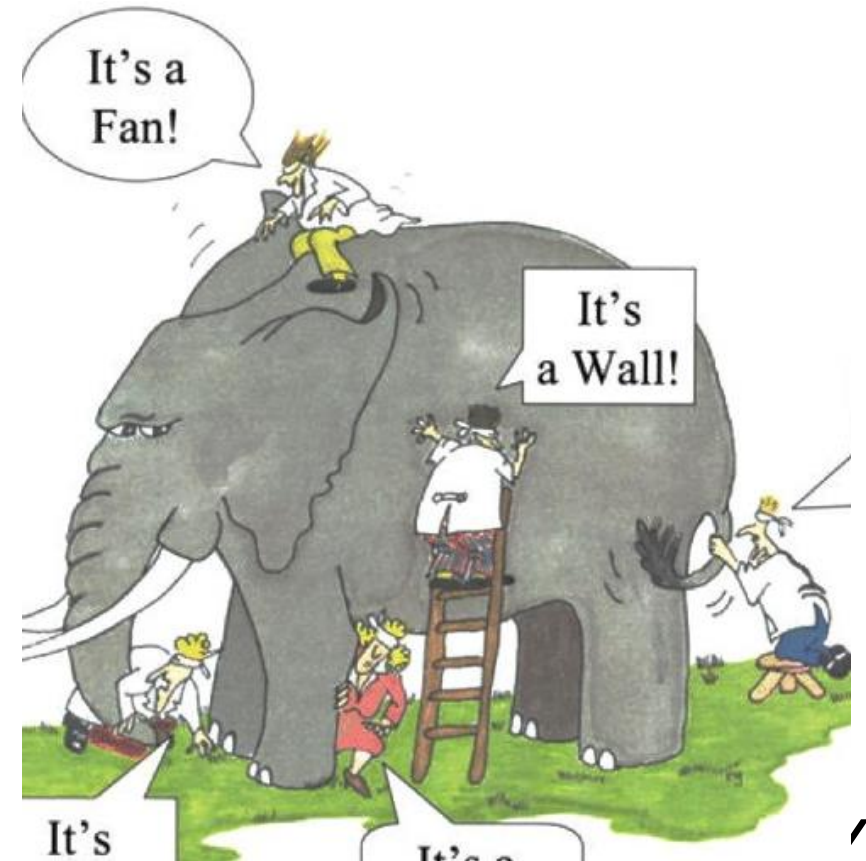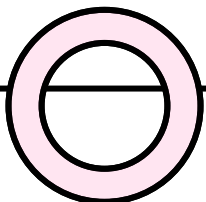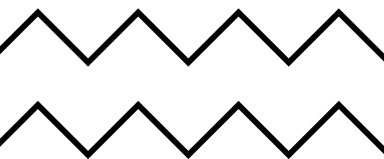
- Although not used in research/practice until the 1970s, there are much earlier examples of such associations, e.g. Scottish author Samuel Smiles' '*Self Help* (1859) and *Character* (1871).

- *However, despite over a century of childhood resilience research/practice, including four waves of resilience research since the 1970s, there is little consensus on the referent of the term, with marginalised and displaced children positioned as objects rather than coproducers of knowledge, and key terms, such as 'positive adaptation' and 'success', lacking definitional clarity.*

My Resilience Research

- **'Man Up', Bullying and Resilience within a Neoliberal Framework'** - *Perceptions in relation to bullying, with a particular focus on discussions around resilience, drawing on data from focus group interviews with children, parents and teachers (Sims-Schouten & Edwards, 2016).*

- **'A troublesome girl is pushed through': Morality, biological determinism, resistance, resilience, and the Canadian child migration schemes, 1883–1939** - *Through analysing case files and correspondence relating to children sent to Canada in the 19th century, I shed light on the complex interplay between morality, biological determinism, resistance, and resilience in decisions around which children should be included or excluded (Sims-Schouten, 2021).*

Revisiting 'resilience' in light of racism, 'othering' and resistance *(Sims-Schouten & Gilbert, 2022)*

There is a need to redefine and reconceptualise resilience, particularly in settings dominated by White middle-class voices that define what 'positive emotions', 'successful traits' and 'coping mechanisms' entail.

Here, through racism and flawed perceptions and interpretations of resilience and 'othering', members from ethnic minority communities are defined as in need of resilience support, whilst at the same time their experience of structural racism, e.g., in relation to mental health support, social/health care practices and school exclusions, is being erased.
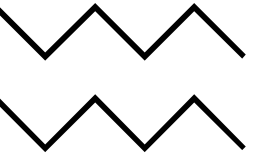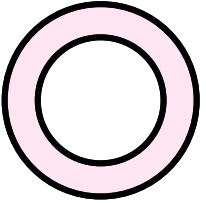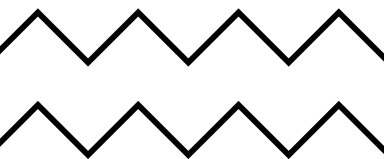
'Resistance' and 'Difference' as threatening

"There was another black lady, her son had been taunted and called the N-word, and she kicked off at the school, and they told her that they will call the police to get her arrested." (Black female)
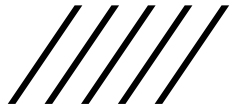
"She has shouted at me in the corridor and said to me my son will not be able to participate in a nativity Christmas play because he is a Muslim. I have never started at her whether he is Muslim, Jewish, Christian or whether he can or cannot play part in the play, so I was really in shock because there were a lot of parents around. She was holding out the reception door, so there are a huge amount of people and there to shout at myself and expectedly put me in the shock and I didn't know what to say to her." (Moroccan female)

Absence, Under-representation and 'Othering'

"*The kids touching (name) hair – there's always kids touching her hair and messing about with her hair and they – we don't see that as a nice thing. You shouldn't do that, you should maybe ask first or something. And they tried to say '[oh] but it's because they like her' and I – I'm saying 'no but that's sort of racist' But it's all about saying 'no' without getting angry I guess 'cause (name) didn't like it, it's a bit rude. She used to say 'I'm not a dog' [laughs]*" (Mother of a mixed-race teenage girl)

Eclectic Resilience in Childhood: Centralising Children's (Counter)Voices

I challenge current resilience research and practice, which, largely driven by psychology and public health disciplines, frame resilience through (deficit) models of health and abnormality, focussing on 'positive emotions' and 'successful traits' and emphasising individual responsibility at the expense of systemic oppression.

Instead, offering an interdisciplinary perspective located at the intersection of the arts, humanities and social sciences, I centralise marginalized and displaced children's stories, memories and voices in accessible and creative ways, thereby disrupting, countering, and drawing critical attention to coping strategies in light of adversity and oppression.

Why Interdisciplinary Research?

- Synthesis of methods and approaches **_can lead to deeper understanding._**

- **Doing justice** to the subject area, as well as (in this case) children and young people.

- Allows for a **critical analysis of** *'positive emotions' and 'successful traits'.*

- ***Eclectic Childhood Resilience>>***

Eclectic Resilience

- The dynamic complexity of childhood resilience, placing marginalised and displaced children's (counter)voices, stories and memories at the centre.

- To facilitate autonomy, power and influence, stimulating memories of the previously forgotten beginning with one question: ***tell me your story!***

Eclectic Resilience

➤ Defiance

➤ Resistance

➤ Compliance

The above are all resilience strategies, yet defiance and resistance often lead to the victim being blamed for 'bad behaviour'.

Children's Counter-Voices of Resilience: Examples from the Past and Present

- *Transformative potential of curating children's stories and experiences in accessible and creative ways to disrupt, counter, and draw critical attention to the impact and legacy of marginalisation and displacement.*

- *'Tell me Your Story': Viewing resilience through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on history, sociology, as well as psychology and health, taking account of cultural realities and individual experiences and voices.*

Counter-Voices of Resilience

"They called me a thief and a liar, rather than resilient"

Recount from former Kindertransport child, when discussing her resilience and coping on arriving in England on her own as a ten-year-old in 1939, providing the example of being **punished when she kept some of the money she collected for a charity for orphaned children, because she herself was an orphan - knowing at that point that her parents and sister had died in the Holocaust.**

Bullying & Neoliberalism: Expecting Resilience and 'Compliance'.

Past: *"And regards poor G, grieved as we are at her sad death, we do <u>not</u> acknowledge that we are responsible; the poor girl was curiously reserved and did not give her confidence (i.e. she did not confide in people) as all the other girls do to the matron; we do not think that a girl of 20 should need visiting."* *(Source: Children's Society, 1918).*

Present: *"Yeah, it's like, I'm sorry you feel this way, Man Up!, in the nicest possible way, you need, need to teach that resilience." (Sims-Schouten and Edwards, 2016).*
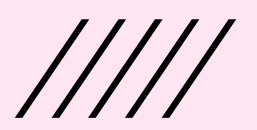
Systemic Oppression, Racism & Discrimination

- *"Many of the 'problem children', I would contend, are suffering a temporary emotional disturbance due to severe culture and family shock"* (Bernard Coard, 1971, cited by The Black Cultural Archives, Barrell Children Exhibition, 2023).

- *"The teachers had no plans for us to even attempt any end-of year exams to achieve national grades. It was not good, considering that it was our final year before taking up employment as young adults and, as always, qualifications matter. I therefore left school with no qualifications and nothing to show for all my years of learning. I certainly believed I had the ability to achieve more but, somehow, lost out."* (Campbell,2022)

EDUCATIONALLY SUB-NORMAL

WIND RUSH SEASON 75

Children deemed "mentally defective" were sent to schools for the educationally subnormal (ESN schools). The criteria applied were riddled with racist assumptions and testing systems which set up Black children to fail.

Education was hugely important in the Caribbean, and teachers were highly respected figures of authority. In the English classroom, the Caribbean children may have been too shy to speak up if they did not understand what was being asked of them. Similarly, the children's accents may have led teachers to brand them as "slow".

The curriculum omitted the culture and history of Black people, denied them their identity and reinforced the idea that white history and culture is superior.

This led to children feeling self-contempt and de-motivated them from a desire to learn.

The temporary emotional disturbance experienced by the children as a result of their traumatic upheaval was not taken into account when testing them. Rather, it tended to be seen as an ingrained character flaw.

These misunderstandings and prejudices led to large numbers of children being wrongly placed in ESN schools. Statistics revealed that in 1967 Caribbean children made up a staggering 75% of the 'immigrant' pupil body at ESN schools. Referral to an ESN provision was permanent. Reintegration into mainstream schools was not a goal of ESN provision, and education focused more on socialisation than on academic achievement. This meant children sent there had no chance to improve their prospects and were essentially stuck with an ESN label for life, which hampered their employment prospects.

Children with Learning Difficulties/Differences & Internalised Failure

• *'My disability makes me sad'*, *'backwards'* and *'90% weird 10% normal'*, are striking as examples of <u>internalised failure</u>.

• <u>This is accompanied by numbers and maths, highlighting this young person's skill in arithmetic, as well as her love for voice acting, voice over and SpongeBob.</u>

• Here it could be argued that she is *resisting the internalised failure by highlighting her skills to counter stigmas and labels of being 'backward' and 'weird'.*

Intergenerational Trauma & Resilience

"I am a survivor. I know this because I come from a line of African-Caribbean people who survived slavery." (Adams, 2020, np)

*"It has been passed down through generations and is one of the reasons why I was able to become kickboxing world champion three times." (*Former kickboxing champion Remy Bonjasky, whose ancestors worked on a Dutch slave plantation in Surinam)

Yet, survivor silence can be misconstrued as resilience, whilst this in fact might signify psychological or political repression and the "unspeakability" of a traumatic past *and* present.

Voices of Child Migration: Children as Experiencers of Childhood

- **Coproducing knowledge between children from the past and present.**

- Centred on ***'things',*** acknowledging objects, stories and artefacts as carriers of complex visual, material, cultural and social meanings generating multiple narratives and interpretations.
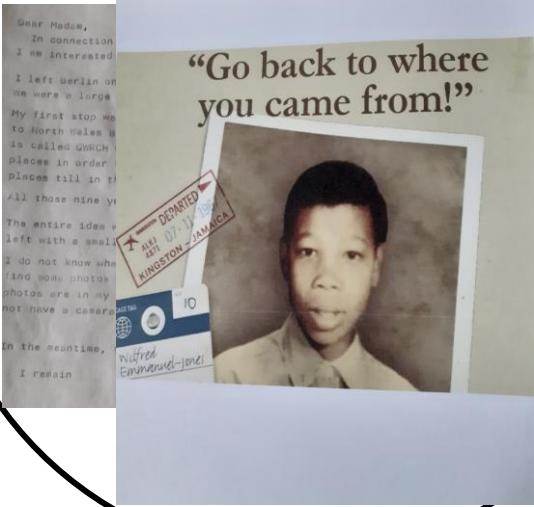
JUST LIKE US...

The objects tell you that the children are just like us.

This tells us that the child migrants are just like us. They are normal people who have had bad luck/experience. (misfortune)

The child migrants probably feel like they do not belong. They might be told to go back to where they come which is not possible because they had to escape for a reason.

objects?

unprecedented

people were overwhelmed

sorry for them because they had to leave their family.

the children wouldn't understand why they had

• feel like an outsider

• no where to go

• have no idea what people are saying.

phone

charger

:c

anxious

worried

sad to leave

relieved
(moved away
from danger)

homesick

isolated

they would feel
angry because
they are being forced
to move despite all
the changes they
are going through
personally

feeli...

sca...

lonely

uncomfortable

pressured

the older children
have to feel responsible for
the younger siblings/children

FEELINGS & EMPATHY

Contemporary Children's Talk about Former Child Migrants/Refugees

- "<u>Children our age</u>, we always take things for granted. People do things like this and it's not very nice."

- "A memory, I'm just going to get over sad straightaway because like all I've got is a <u>memory</u>."

- "Scary because you've never- you don't have someone that you like always had around, also angry because you're being like forced to change something when you're already like changing physically. <u>Puberty</u>. Changing into a teenager."

- "And people are so <u>selfish</u>. Like, us British people are so proud to be British but our history is like actually <u>nasty</u>. It's just <u>disgusting</u> that people can be so selfish."

○

Only when children are heard, taken seriously and their needs engaged with is it possible to truly make sense of what childhood resilience entails and what support is required to facilitate the development of resilience in different social and cultural groups.

<u>But:</u>

- *A need to engage with complex and (potentially) contradictory explanations and interpretations of what 'interdisciplinarity' entails.*

- *Interdisciplinarity – multi-disciplinarity – transdisciplinarity.*
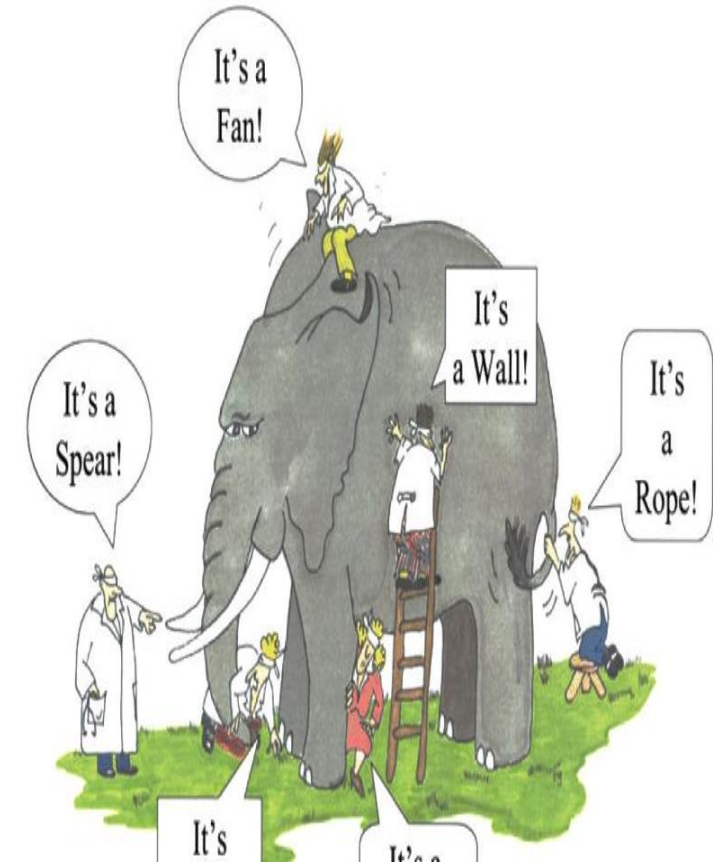
- *Research – Practice.*

Benefits of Interdisciplinarity in Research & Practice

To shed a light on the inherent complexity of nature and society;

Solving problems and answering questions that are not confined to a single discipline;

Leading to revolutionary insights, and generative interventions and technologies

Tackling social issues and problems.

Implications for Theory & Practice

There is a need to revisit/redefine resilience, as well as take seriously the methods and strategies employed by children from diverse communities, to express resilience, e.g. in light of discrimination and bias.

Resilience can also mean 'resistance' and 'defiance', i.e. resisting bad treatment and racism, as well as reflecting agency, identity and ownership of ones own life and choices within this.

Yet, in light of dominant constructions of resilience, resistance tends to be viewed negatively and equated with bad behaviour, positioning the victim of racism as the 'Other'.

A need to resist a neoliberalist approach towards childhood resilience

Reflective practice: Are things done, because they have always been done in a particular manner? Why is this? Are there other ways or new ways of looking at things, creating new understandings and meaning?

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