

Reflections on the paper *Principles of Trauma-informed approaches to child sexual abuse: a discussion paper* (Quadara & Hunter 2016).

Introduction

In the course of its investigations the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has commissioned a number of research reports. The purpose of these commissioned pieces of work is to develop a body of knowledge that can be usefully applied in the creation of best practice models and approaches for responding to the needs of those who have been impacted by institutional child sexual abuse.

Principles of trauma-informed approaches to child sexual abuse: a discussion paper is one such commissioned work provided by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, on request from the Royal Commission.

This paper *reflects* on the complexity of harms experienced by Forgotten Australians and how respectful and purposeful responses and healing to this harm can be supported.

It suggests that the application of only a clinical treatment lens (as implied by the above report) to the issues facing Forgotten Australians diminishes recognition of the impact of the destructive and all-encompassing social and psychological environment experienced by these adults as children and will, therefore, reduce the range of support and therapeutic services responses that this group requires and deserves.

Background

Open Place is the specialist service in Victoria for a group of people who experienced out of home 'care' as children prior to 1989; these people are now known as 'Forgotten Australians'. This title came from the 2004 Senate Committee Report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children. Open Place is funded by both the Victorian and Federal governments to provide services to Forgotten Australians brought up and/or living in Victoria.

As the summary of the *Forgotten Australians* report states, approximately 500,000 Australians experienced all or part of their childhood in an orphanage or some other form of

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out-of-home care during the last century. The Senate Committee received hundreds of graphic and disturbing accounts of treatment and care experienced by children that outlined a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and often criminal, physical and sexual assault. Accounts included stories of neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare. This was widespread across institutions. The consequences of this experience has been devastating in many people's lives.

Over ten years have passed since this report was tabled in the Australian parliament. Few of the key recommendations have been implemented. Meanwhile Forgotten Australians are ageing without resources and continuing to live with the impact of their adverse childhood experiences.

Recently the Victorian government conducted a parliamentary enquiry, resulting in the report, ***Betrayal of Trust (2014)*** that included recommendations echoing the Senate Report's findings of more than a decade beforehand.

Additionally, the evidence and findings to date of the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse validate that the horrific treatment of children in the institutions charged with their care happened, was widespread, and has had a lifelong, far reaching impact on adult survivors.

Reflections

The ***Principles*** paper provides a rich description and analysis of current trauma theory and practice. It provides a useful acknowledgement of the complex relationships between trauma and mental illness, substance abuse and other complex adaptive (maladaptive) behaviours.

Two aspects important to a trauma-informed approach for Forgotten Australians are absent from this paper.

1. The impact of institutionalisation
2. The impact of loss of identity

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Impact of institutionalization

The all-encompassing nature of the institutional care world and the insidious and overwhelmingly adverse impact of daily institutional life on the social and emotional development of a child is almost beyond comprehension. Many of the features of institutional care were also replicated in the foster care system of the day; no formal oversight, a small and closed care arrangement and frequent moves from placement to placement without explanation.

Open Place is a specialist service for the adult survivors of this ‘trauma’, which could be described as the impact of childhood spent behind the walls of closed or ‘total’ institutions (*Asylums*, E. Goffman 1974) with all that entailed (well described in the 2014 Senate report, *Forgotten Australians*). In addition to the harms of institutional negligence and abuse, children were then thrown into an alien ‘outside’ world, unprepared and without resources. Left to get by on their own, many survivors took up survival strategies that have failed them over time.

A fundamental principle of Open Place service delivery is that “something happened to you” rather than “something is wrong with you”. The *Principles* paper provides evidence that supports this lens and provides examples of practice modalities that are genuinely grounded in this principle. However, given the life experience of many Forgotten Australians, the paper does not consider in enough depth the complexity of the “something happened to you” that many Forgotten Australians experienced, and how this has played out in their lives. The challenge is applying the theory of trauma-informed approaches into practice in the ‘more than trauma’ context of Forgotten Australians lives.

The experience of Forgotten Australians is still poorly known and understood in the ‘helping’ sector, and virtually unknown in the general community. In fact this history is so extreme, the impact on survivors so deep and varied, the survival strategies so diverse in approaches and effect, it is difficult for anyone to understand how to apply a trauma-informed approach for Forgotten Australians.

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Paradoxically we are told over and over by Forgotten Australians that they don't want to re-tell their experiences; they want the people who are 'helping' to know. This knowing about the 'something happened to you' is a practice wisdom, built over time listening to the experiences of many Forgotten Australians. What we have learnt is that the "something" is not necessarily an "event". It is a lifetime of experiences that "happened" overtime and became cumulatively oppressive and destructive to optimum childhood development.

Their experience is so far from the everyday norms of society that it is difficult for survivors to explain, or for 'outsiders' to understand. Many Forgotten Australians have told us that people and services simply find them 'too hard'. Many, often with very good reason, distrust 'professionals' and authority. Many 'helping' professionals have failed Forgotten Australians, both as children and adults. Being pathologised and criminalised is familiar ground, and for many Forgotten Australians this continues even today. Most have been denied justice or redress. Many have never accessed other services, never told their family and friends, never realised they are not alone. Around 500,000 Australians have had this experience!

Open Place's 'more than trauma' approach is based on an in-depth understanding of this complex and varied context. The service was built from the lived experience and advocacy of Forgotten Australians and has now accumulated almost seven years of walking alongside Forgotten Australians, listening to their experiences and learning how best to be useful. Our services don't require assessment, diagnosis or any 'pathology'; they are simply available for survivors who might want some extra capacity to improve their everyday lives today.

Moving from 'trauma-informed' theory and good intent into the daily practice of a 'more than trauma' approach has entailed a lot of learning for our service. This learning has happened over time, guided by the experiences of Forgotten Australians, and grounded in a process of continuous improvement.

Delivering 'trauma-informed' services means putting theory into practice; perhaps more easily said than done. Open Place, privileged to bear witness to the lives and experiences of Forgotten Australians, has built a practice wisdom that applies trauma-informed theory in a more than trauma approach.

Words and theories are cheap, 'experts' and 'expert knowledge' have often failed Forgotten Australians. Lived experience and a commitment to build genuine practice wisdom need to

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be the foundation of any efforts to apply ‘trauma-informed’ approaches and successfully move from theory to practice.

How to gain this knowledge? How can we, across all sectors of the “helping” professions, know?

First, we have to acknowledge that we will never **really** know. We must avoid the presumption that as professionals we have a magic/silver bullet that allows us, as experts, to provide a cure.

We then have to acknowledge that there may **never be a ‘cure’** in terms of diagnostic and measurement of goals achieved. We are suspicious of “treatment” approaches. We believe that there are multiple approaches which together may usefully ameliorate current circumstances of loneliness, isolation, anxiety and suspicion.

Once we understand that there is no single treatment bullet and that multiple approaches are needed the next step is for staff to **learn**. A beginning is to ask staff, who are implementing a trauma-informed approach to their work, about their own organisation’s history and involvement in past practices of institutional ‘care’. Staff can then be expected to read; the Senate Report and the many personal histories of childhoods spent in orphanages. Staff need to watch the DVD produced by the Alliance for Forgotten Australians. Staff can be expected to seek out Forgotten Australians and to **listen** to their stories.

With this knowledge our service for Forgotten Australians can do many things; records access and family reunion, counselling (at a time and place of Forgotten Australians choosing, with an open ended option to dip in and out; there is no treatment plan), support for better access to service provision and social support activities that develop social connection and shared experiences.

Open Place encourages (is that a strong enough word?) those other services and professionals who will, inevitably, come into contact with Forgotten Australians to implement the above practices. Open Place is happy to provide opportunities for such learning. Ask us!

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The impact of loss of identity

The reality for many Forgotten Australians is, as a result of their time in “care”, that contact with siblings and with their family and place of origin was often lost. The Senate Report recognised this: *This is not only a heartbreaking experience but also one that has a major impact on an individual’s sense of self and identity. Many care leavers feel that they belong nowhere, isolated and being unable to establish attachments which the majority of people take for granted* (P.253).

Nowhere in the ***Principles*** is this issue acknowledged or addressed. It is incomprehensible how a review of “trauma informed” treatment programs can remain so ignorant of fundamental issues of identity (who am I?) and belonging (where did I come from?). These issues of identity and belonging eat at the heart of self-belief and self-worth.

This sense of loss and of fragmented identity can often be made worse when the records of a child’s life in care are sought. Many records are deficient in detail, some have been destroyed and some paint a negative view of the child. For those whose records have been destroyed or contain only a note of an admission and then an exit from care, is a further demonstration, by the authorities, of an apparent indifference to the worth of a child’s life. Self-worth and self-belief continue to be undermined.

These are matters that need to be understood by professional helpers. Fragmented identity and the experience of being separated from family and siblings and place often contribute, alongside the actual experience of “care”, to a diminished level of both social and personal skills and resilience the Forgotten Australian is able to bring to his/her adult life.

Conclusion

This ***reflection*** understands the preliminary and exploratory nature of the ***Principles*** report. The report does provide a neat overview of the professional literature as defined by “trauma informed” interventions. However the deficiencies in the scope and breadth of the reviewed literature are telling; the literature is very largely that of the professions and academia. Studies and reports on survivors and survivors own stories are absent.

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What is not contained in the survey of treatment responses by the *Principles* report obviously cannot come within the purview of the report. It is disappointing that what is not included are the volumes and recordings of powerful and desolating written and oral histories.

For example, where is a reference to the 2004 Senate Report, *Forgotten Australians*, to the National Library's rich oral history collection provided by Forgotten Australians and to the wealth of personal stories? F.Golding, *An Orphan's Escape* (2005) and J.Penglase, *Orphans of the Living* (2005), for example, are well written and acutely observed. All these sources provide valuable insight and relevant clinical material for politicians, bureaucrats and professionals to develop better responses to helping Forgotten Australians.

Forgotten Australians are as worthy of attention (some would argue more so given the culpability of states and institutions while 'caring' for children) as any other cohort of adults who have been disadvantaged and abused as children. All abused adults (and children) need attention. All need a community that understands and responds in ways that are useful and healing.

But the creation and development of helping models and programs must take into account the enormity of the social and psychological hurdles faced by adults who experienced institutional and orphanage care; the Forgotten Australians. They can only be taken into account if these factors are known and recognised, in both the popular mind and in the professional helping circles.

These reflections therefore are a plea that when recommending and constructing a new/redeveloped/ integrated/ streamlined/re-engineered/trauma informed service system do not forget (again!) the impact of childhood and then the adult life experiences of Forgotten Australians.

And a last word: any new developments must have survivors advising and being active in their creation. If there are pots of new resources available these must not be captured by vested therapeutic interest groups who have a particular treatment and professional lens. One lens does not fit all perspectives and experiences.

Simon Gardiner
Manager, Open Place
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