
Coping, resilience and posttraumatic growth: adverse childhood experiences and social work students

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the perceptions of third-year social work students at a selected university in South Africa regarding the effects of having endured adverse childhood experiences. Findings showed the beginnings of positive life lessons that can emerge from having endured adverse experiences. Findings also confirmed the process of coping with these experiences that included outcomes of resilience and burgeoning posttraumatic growth. Implications are discussed especially regarding the place and development of coping, resilience and posttraumatic growth in social work education and social work practice. Recommendations include the professional use of self and self-awareness through mindfulness teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

The social work profession has historically focused on the effects of adversity on the lives of people (McMillen, 1999). This focus has often taken the form of emphasising deficit models that are problem-focused and diagnosis-oriented. There has been a fundamental shift with social workers preferring strengths-based approaches and models that accentuate people's abilities and aptitudes when confronted with stressful or traumatic situations (Rodgers, 2014; Saleebey, 2002). Despite the humanistic and value-based emphases of these approaches and models, they mostly underscored individualistic perspectives with a concerted focus on the self (Gray, 2011). Consequently, there has been insufficient attention on the role of macro socio-political structures and environmental conditions in the challenges experienced by the individual (Gray, 2011). This study though does focus on social work students and their social experiences and of necessity will have an individualistic focus because each one's experience is unique.

In a specific South African university, students generally mirrored the social history and experiences of the communities from which they stem that link to the broader South African society (Carelse and Dykes, 2013; Petersen, 2010). The findings of a primary study provided clarity regarding the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) of social work students: frequent childhood abuses (including physical, sexual and emotional); ineffectual caregiving (parental substance abuse, desertion and absence); poor family wellbeing (in particular family conflict and intimate partner violence); and poor social environments. The significant implications were that they were not aloof from these harrowing incidents

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