

A couple of years ago *The Psychologist* happily published an piece of mine which followed an earlier review of *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege: A guide to therapeutic work with boarding school survivors*, Routledge 2016, in which I described a treatment methodology and theory of a specialised client group that I had been studying and treating for 30 years. My work was without funding except my own as a psychotherapist in private practice.

In the article I ask for the support of psychologists, since they were the ones doing the scientific research while psychotherapist's clinical data is often discounted as anecdotal. However, despite my plea, the question raised in feedback to my article was 'Where is your empirical research evidence for all this?'

There are two major issues here are

1. the General Research Problem (GRP) and
2. the specific character of what here needs researching: boarding children becoming ex-boarder adults

The General Research Problem:

Research is often regarded as the gold standard and yet it is in fact, I submit, subject to two psychological factors or rather issues of consciousness. The study of consciousness is a superordinate one to the carrying out of qualitative or quantitative research, which is in fact based on an 18th century idea of 'natural sciences'.

1. Normalisation.

Cultures operating normalisation become special cases. Normalisation is a psychoanalytically defined 'defence mechanism' which occurs not only with individuals but in societies, which renders whole groups like fish who are unable to see the water. This means that researchers are unable to formulate questions that take account of the 'water' quality. The Heisenberg principle encompasses this philosophically - researchers, especially in sociology, are always *inside* the box, unfortunately.

This happens to what I called the British Attitude to Children, which occupies a unique place in worldwide culture. See *The Making of Them: the British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*, 2000.

2. Paradox.

The 18th century idea of 'natural sciences' can never take account of the paradoxical nature of reality, which all consciousness studies attest to. This is because paradox is against Aristotelian logic, propping up Enlightenment philosophy and its cultures, in particular Modernism, (and its twin postmodernism) where the ultimate test formula is you cannot have an A alongside a Non-A. Endeavours outside this frame, such as meta-modernism or psycho-spiritual depth-psychology are not able to be fully understood or validated.

For example, boarding children come from families where they are genuinely loved and boarding is seen as 'the best thing for them'; but being sent away the connections with love are severed and irrecoverable loss is the result. So the boarder is both loved and not loved. People sometimes find this hard to understand.

Researching boarding is almost impossible because of two other factors"

1. How do you research a syndrome that begins at 8 but only really surfaces, except in some cases, at the age of 40? Because it is not a question that all boarders are damaged by boarding but *all boarders have to survive*. The Strategic Survival Personality that I identified is long lasting, but because it was built by a child will inevitably become maladaptive over time. So you probably have to start there.
2. How do you research a syndrome that is supported by and promoted by a two billion funding lobby? Research mostly follows the money unfortunately.

So sometimes you have to breakthrough with a bit of luck, so I am going to tell you about the work of Olya Khaleelee. She is an organizational psychologist with a 40 year career behind her, but still working. Here publications include:

Khaleelee, O., 2018, 'Boarding school and resilience', *Attachment: New Directions in Psychotherapy and Relational Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 12, August: pp. 61–70. Based on a paper originally given at a conference entitled Boarding School—Surviving the Syndrome on 9th September 2017 held at the University of Brighton.

2016, 'Boarding school, Brexit, and our leaders' judgement'. *Organisational & Social Dynamics*, 16 (2): 271–276.

1997, with Tomlinson, P., *Intrapsychic factors in staff selection at the Cotswold Community*. *Therapeutic Communities* , 18 (4): 255–269.

1994, 'The defence mechanism test as an aid for selection and development of staff', *Therapeutic Communities* , 15 (1): 3–13.

References in my text are taken from Khaleelee 2018, where the full references may be obtained.

Olya Khaleelee's research on the experience of boarding school was unintended. She came to look at it from two different perspectives. The first is a research project looking at the resilience of staff working in a therapeutic community where children have suffered early physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect and have developed acute behavioural problems as a result. All were boarders. The second is an analysis of research data arising from testing the resilience of senior executives headhunted for top jobs. Only in retrospect were the results sorted to show the effect of those who boarded.

Khaleelee's research was based on a particular methodology of psychological assessment using tests and interviews, the core of which was a perceptual stress test called the Defence Mechanisms Test (DMT). This consisted of the subject being shown a number of pictures using a tachistoscope (an instrument used for exposing objects to the eye for a very brief measured period of time) from which a hypothesis of emotional development could be derived. This indicated which defence mechanisms this particular individual used to protect themselves from stress and approximately when, during their lives, these defences had been mobilised.

The DMT was developed by Uwe Kragh during the 1950s as the result of a high level of failure in the selection of Swedish trainee fighter pilots. This failure resulted from the fact that under the stress of flying, a high proportion were unable accurately to perceive the reality around them and to take appropriate action. In other words, their stress levels affected their judgement. During a long programme of research at the University of Lund, Kragh attempted a systematic experimental study of how the perception of complex stimuli is built up over time. The

assumption was that if stimuli which raised anxiety were used, one could gain insight into perceptual processes by looking at the different strategies individuals mobilised for coping with this anxiety. Further research was carried out over the next 20 years and was summed up by the work of Cooper (1988) who clarified the basic principles of perceptual genetics.

The Defence Mechanisms Test can slow down the perceptual process so that the misperceptions, distortions and transformations, which constitute the normal perceptual process can be examined in detail. By examining the perceptual process, the test purports to measure the defence mechanisms mobilised to cope with the anxiety generated in stressful situations. The theoretical postulate is that the more psychic energy required to defend the personality against threat, the less is available for coping with external realities. As a result, the defences alter perceptions of external reality. Heavy defences, such as denial, will be linked with poorer reality testing, impaired decision making, and a slower capacity to respond in times of crisis.

This methodology has been used and validated in studies over the last decades including trainee and qualified air-traffic controllers and in research on subjective fear in parachute jumpers and in training for parachute jumping, the assessment of serious drinking and driving offenders, on determining the personality disorder of psychiatric patients and on the efficacy of programmes of group therapy. There is considerable evidence of links between defence mechanisms and performance on tasks, which are thought to demand swift and accurate responses under conditions of stress, whether that is flying an aeroplane, making a crucial decision at senior executive level, or managing a disturbed child.

Oly wrote to me in 2014: "I've used it predictively and 100% accurately when working as Staff Selection Consultant to the Cotswold Community, a therapeutic community - trying to ensure that staff working with very damaged boys would stay for a minimum of 3 years," which she describes in her Attachment article.

Her second piece of research related to her work as a corporate psychologist attached to a partnership that helps senior managers and leaders to develop a new career strategy, following their departure from their employing organisations. As part of a lengthy process they had the opportunity to see the in-house psychologist for an all-day assessment. The assessment consisted of a number of exercises including the DMT, an in-depth discussion about formative and career development, feedback, production of a written report and a further face-to-face meeting with the executive and the partner working with them in order to think about their future. One objective was to add information to their decision-making process. Another was to maximise the fit between their inner world, their successful career to date, opportunities likely to arise in the future and the context in which they would operate most effectively. In this way, the aim was to maximise their personal and professional fulfilment in the future.

Together with a work colleague, Ralph Woolf, test data from the last ten years of working with these senior executives was analysed. A significant proportion attended boarding school as children: 45 senior executives who boarded were tested and compared with 45 non-boarders drawn randomly from the files. Earlier mention was made of the timeline of emotional development that was derived from the test, indications of which defence mechanisms were mobilised to protect the individual from stress and a hypothesis about how resilient they were. The test analysed whether their defence mechanisms were so powerful that they were prevented

from remaining in touch with their emotional intelligence, and their capacity to perceive threats in the environment when under pressure. This had a major impact on their ability to make good judgements when stressed, continuing to engage resiliently with strategic requirements without becoming overwhelmed — essential requirements for corporate leaders.

One key defence mechanism in assessing resilience is “regression”, which Winnicott (1978) clarified as representing a return to the point at which the environment has failed the individual frequently during childhood. Appropriate and consistent parental availability, love, and support are the essential prerequisites of emotional growth. Where these are missing, development stops and the absent developmental needs dominate subsequent living. Regression, as he saw it, is therefore a search for missing relational experience.

On the question of resilience, Bowlby’s (1969) view also was that attachment, the bond of affection between infant or child and parent that implies the provision of security, particularly in times of hunger, thirst, stress, illness, or anxiety was the key in building lifelong resilience and emotional well-being. Most people experience shocks at some time during their lives. The majority overcome them because they are resilient enough, having experienced the continuity of good parenting that is the cornerstone of a solid sense of identity. This enables them to bounce back and continue to mature. However, we now know that shock and trauma from early prolonged separation, such as boarding, prevents emotional maturing because the inner child part of the self feels abandoned and continues to reside in a vacuum within the adult self. Bowlby himself was an unhappy boarder from a young age and once said: “I wouldn’t send a dog to boarding school at 8”, although he failed to quote it in his published work. (See Professor Joy Schaverien’s

This level of environmental failure resulting from the shock of this kind of separation can also result in the development of a “false self”, whereby feelings of emptiness and deadness are hidden behind a defensive facade of authenticity (Winnicott, 1978). Kohut (1977) also developed this concept in his work on narcissistic injury. Regression resulting from prolonged separation impacts on resilience, leads to the development of other heavier defence mechanisms, and often has a lifelong deleterious effect on work and relationships (Khaleelee, 2016).

The boarders consisted of 36 male and 9 female senior executives aged 42–57. All but one were British. They were compared with 45 non-boarders drawn randomly from the files who had also been assessed, consisting of 11 women and 34 men aged between 30 and 60. Twenty-eight (63%) were British. Whilst all boarders coped with the experience and many went on to have successful careers, it was clear that their personalities had been profoundly altered.

During the assessments, feelings about boarding school were still quite graphic. A number described the effect of boarding school as having resulted in a poor relationship with the authoritative father figure and a distant relationship with mother and siblings. One described always feeling an outsider in the family, found toeing the line difficult, and said his father preferred his sisters. He rejected his school, became very self-destructive and felt he was a disappointment to his father. Another said that he dislikes authority, missed having a father and had little relationship with his mother who bonded with his sister. At school, when challenged by authority, he did not obey, was beaten in front of the house, and was left in tears, feeling awful and humiliated.

For many the effects had carried over into their relationships with bosses, as well as with their own

spouse and children. An executive who was at boarding school abroad and was perceived at work as indecisive and insecure, spoke of the beatings, being grateful for being able to eat and missing out on love and affection. This, he told me, had made him very self contained with an inability to rely on others. Another ex-boarder who suffers from an “anxious gut” said that boarding school left him insecure and traumatised. Speaking of the experience, he became agitated, spilled his coffee out of anxiety and then worried about what others would think of him were they to know he had such feelings.

An executive who had attended a convent boarding school described “physical hitting, not a loving environment, appalling food for the children versus good food for the nuns”, all of which generated a strong sense of social justice. Another described the high price paid for a good education, including five years of crying himself to sleep each night, a hatred of authority and a huge fear of failure.

One executive who was at boarding school from an early age, described being “bullied through envy, ambushed and beaten up”, reinforcing an image of himself as not being a nice person. As a result he had never been good at dealing with conflict. He said “my parents knew I was unhappy, I felt sent away, scared to be on my own, very lonely and it was very difficult to make friends.” Later he had diverted himself with beer and cannabis. This executive became a CEO but was perceived as extremely hard to reach emotionally.

The preliminary results of her analysis showed that: i

- Over 60% of the sample of ex-boarders had signs of early separation shock in their timelines compared to under 25% of non-boarders.
- Whilst 50% of non-boarders were able to stay in touch with their emotional intelligence under stress, only 33% of ex-boarders were able to do so.
- A mere 13% of ex-boarders could be described as fully resilient.
- Examination of the timelines of ex-boarders with signs of early separation-shock showed that 70% could not stay in touch with their emotional intelligence under pressure, and a further proportion were either over-sensitive or perceived threats in the environment late, making 86% in all.
- Those who were over-sensitive to threat as a result of hyper-vigilance following early trauma from prolonged separation tended to see threats in the environment too early and may have overplayed them.

Of course there are always exceptions in the sense that some executives who did not attend boarding school also showed signs of regression and were not very resilient and equally, some executives who did go to boarding school were not significantly damaged by the experience. There are also a few executives for whom boarding school was a safe haven and a relief from the difficulties at home. However, one general inference from our research is that those who went to boarding school, especially before the age of 13, were more likely to experience a shock resulting from prolonged separation from parents. The effect was to make them less able in adulthood to identify threats with an emotional component than those who did not board. This would impact on judgement and one can think about this in terms of recent and current political events, and how those ex-boarders in leadership positions have exercised judgement particularly at governmental level.

Bio

Nick Duffell, MA (Oxon) Dip Psych IP, was born in 1949, and was educated mostly at boarding schools in Europe and the UK. He took his degree in Sanskrit at Oxford, and then taught in a boarding school in India for two years. As an adult he trained and qualified in Systemic Family Therapy, Psychosynthesis and Sexual Grounding Somatic Therapy. Nick has worked as a teacher, care-staff, carpenter, divorce mediator, psychotherapist, leadership consultant and author. He is an Honorary Research Associate at University College London working on a VR experiment for healing childhood attachments.

Nick's first book, *The Making of Them: the British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System* received wide critical acclaim, including endorsements by the British Medical Journal, John Le Carré, and many Amazon readers. In this book he set out his findings of his pioneering group therapy with 'Boarding School Survivors,' as he provocatively named adult ex-boarders, following an article in 1990 in *The Independent* newspaper, which received thousands of affirmative letters from the general public.

In 2014, Nick's controversial essay on the political ramifications of his work *Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion - a Psychohistory* appeared and has been widely endorsed by cutting edge thinkers and including Professor Stephen Porges and novelist Philip Pullman. *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege: A guide to therapeutic work with boarding school survivors*, with Thurstine Basset, was published by Routledge in 2016.

From 1987 – to current, Nick has practiced as psychotherapist and group therapist and freelance trainer in several psychotherapy and counselling organisations in the UK, Holland, Switzerland and Scandinavia.

From 1990 - 1996 Nick was a faculty member of the Institute of Psychosynthesis in North London. From 1996 – 2001 he worked for the Human Potential Group at the University of Surrey and was a contributor to their 2001 *Dictionary of Personal Development*.

In 1996, he co-founded the Centre for Gender Psychology, offering public workshops as well as specialist training for professionals in the field of relationships, sex, and gender, with Helena Løvendal. In 2002, HarperCollins published their book *Sex, Love and the Danger of Intimacy*, which has now been translated into several languages.

Nick has been a frequent writer for many psychological journals, and has produced several books and chapter contributions to others. These days, Nick is committed to the development psychohistory as a tool for understanding current world problems. His most important recent contribution is a collaboration with the political activist John Bunzl of SIMPOL, *The Simpol Solution: Solving Global Problems Could Be Easier Than We Think*.