

Understanding family conflict and its relationship with youth homelessness.

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2017 Victorian Homelessness Conference
13/9/2017

Youth homelessness and family conflict in Australia

- In the 2011 Census, the ABS estimated 105,237 Australians were homeless, with 26,238 (25 per cent) aged between 12-24 years.
- Both in Australia and internationally, family conflict and breakdown remains the most significant factor in young people becoming homeless (Rosenthal, et al, 2006; Johnson, et al, 2008; Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 1998).
- Youth homelessness and its causes are complex and multi-faceted, relating to the structural, familial and personal impediments that contribute to young people's marginalisation.

Methods

The research team conducted seven focus groups, including:

- Three groups of young people who've experienced (or are at risk of) homelessness;
- Three groups of parents of young people with experience of family conflict; and
- One group of Melbourne City Mission staff working with young people and families experiencing conflict or homelessness.

Participants

There were 39 participants in the study, including:

- 21 young people, aged 16 to 24 years, consisting of 10 males and 11 females. Four identified as culturally and linguistically diverse and 1 was from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.
- Of the 21 young people, 10 were homeless, 4 were in shared accommodation and 5 were living with parents or carers.
- 8 parent/guardians, aged 43 to 61 years old. All were female and 4 were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- 10 Melbourne City Mission staff, including managers, case workers, social workers and youth workers, with work experience ranging from 5 months to more than 10 years.

Two key questions:

- How is family conflict experienced and understood?
- What is the source of family conflict?

How is family conflict experienced and understood?

‘Overt and situational’ family conflict

- ‘Overt and situational’ family conflict refers to expressive and demonstrable actions and behaviours that are antagonistic in nature.
- They are ‘overt’ in that they are explicit forms of conflict, largely identifiable as conflict, have an immediate impact on participants, and are often based on the ‘situational’ context in which they occur.
- Includes: Various forms of verbal conflict, criticism, negativity and aggression, as well as acts of violence

Examples of 'overt and situational' conflict

- *“When I have conflicts with my family... they'd rise up to violence. My mum would start yelling and then my brother and sister would get involved. Then because I didn't fight, they'd beat up on me until I fought back” (YP – Focus group A).*
- *“...when I came back down to Melbourne he [father] was just like you fucked up up there and all that crap, that's why you're back here...” (YP – Focus Group C).*
- *“...she'd turn around and say I wish you weren't my mother. I wish you weren't my mother. I wish you were dead. I hope you get hit by a bus and things like that” (Parent – Focus group A).*

'Latent and ongoing' family conflict

- 'Latent and ongoing' family conflict is accumulated and unresolved conflict that underscores family life.
- Experiences of 'latent' conflict occur beyond the instance of 'overt and situational' conflict, and is typically ongoing.
- It is frequently experienced in discreet forms of family functioning, feelings and generalised atmosphere of family life, often not yet manifested into 'overt and situational' forms of conflict.
- Experienced as;
 - an atmosphere of mistrust, hostility, negativity, unresolved tension and conflict, feeling unsafe and uncomfortable
 - an absence of warmth, care and consideration in family relationships

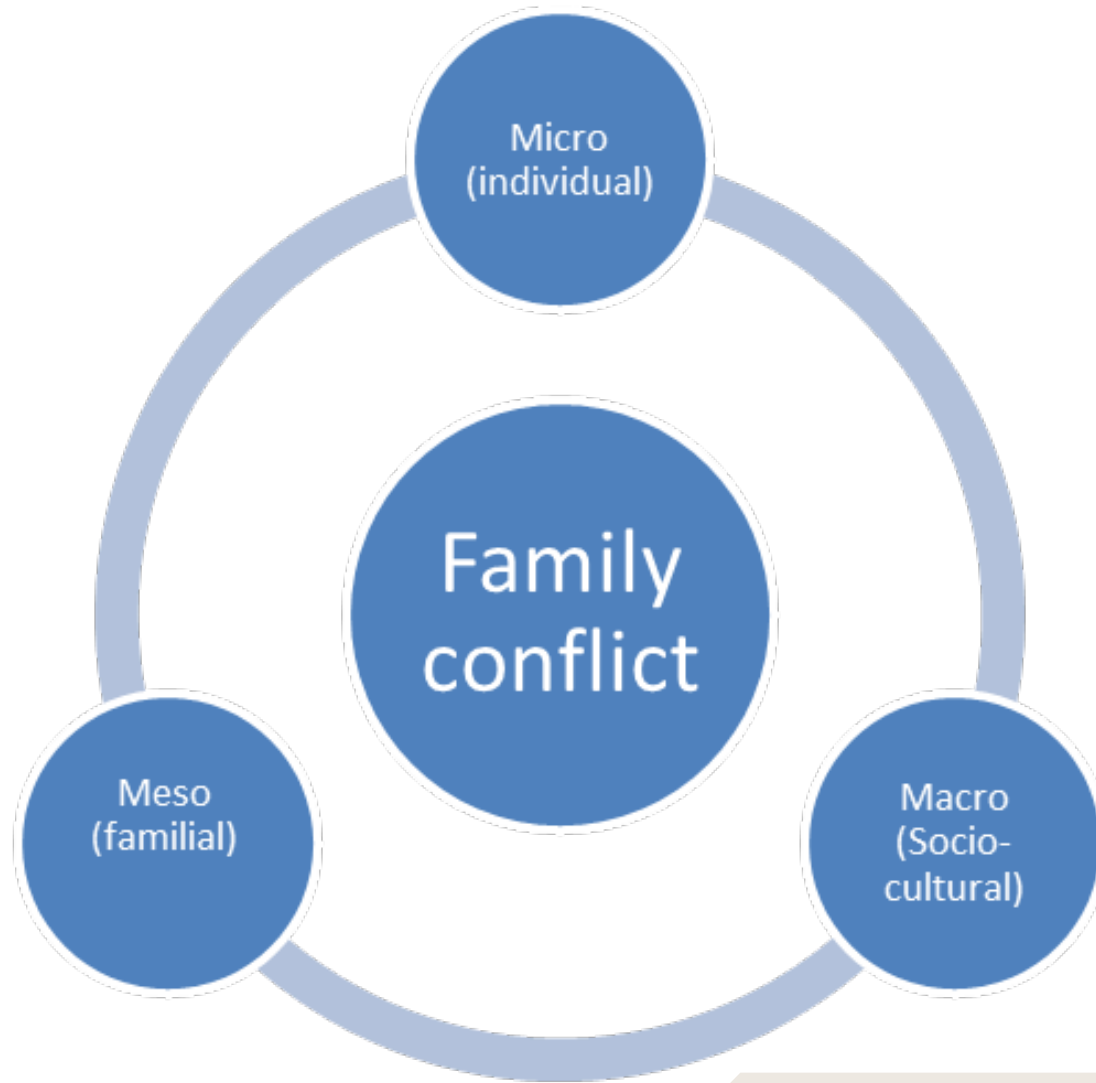
Examples of 'latent and ongoing' family conflict

- *“So that's what conflict is, pretty much; just not being able to escape that constant atmospheric negativity that just has an impact on how you feel as a person. [It] just drives you mental because it just makes you think that the world is just nothing but a place of crap, pretty much” (YP – Focus group A).*
- *“Constant negativity. All the time, just - it's hard to cut a break from what's constantly going on. It sucks. It really does” (YP – Focus group A).*
- *“Just like you develop a state of mind where you cannot be comfortable” (YP – focus group A).*
- *“So those two sides - two different sides, two different points of views, but very passionate about their points of views. The way that it collides just - like it's not a clean slate after it collides. There's a lot of rubble in this....” (YP – focus group A).*

The relationship between 'overt and situational' and 'latent and ongoing' family conflict



What is the source of family conflict?



Micro (individual)

- Micro (individual) sources of family conflict refer to the types and experiences of conflict involving incidents, events and behaviours that lead to ‘overt and situational’ conflict.

These sources mostly pertain to the actions and behaviours of individuals who are directly involved in the conflict itself, including:

- Routine conflict and general disagreement
- Conflict and tension over behaviours such as; chores, or the use of phones, internet/social media, verbal aggression and conflict including arguments and criticism
- Violence

Micro (individual) examples

“Yeah, you feel like you're talking to a brick wall, it just gets you frustrated and it's going to start an argument” (YP – Focus group A).

“But it got to the stage where she was home, she was, I think 14, 15 and she was just going out of a night. I'd say you're not going out. You can't go out. Where are you going?...” (Parent – Focus group B).

“We set down certain rules; she didn't agree with them. She would not clean her room. She would not do chores. She would not go to bed when she was told. She would not get up for school” (Parent – Focus group C).

Meso (familial)

Meso (familial) sources of family conflict refers to underlying family functioning and the home environment that can lead to family conflict.

These sources of family conflict have an indirect relationship to family conflict, yet have a strong influence over the environment and conditions in which conflict manifests.

This category draws attention to how problematic family relationships can be an organising principle of the family. These sources of conflict typically pertain to pervasive and ongoing behaviours and functioning of a family. These include:

- Conflict as an organising principle of family life
- Disintegration of trust in family
- Absence of love in family
- Strong feelings of abandonment.

Meso (familial) examples

“It's about trust I reckon. Sometimes when your family loses trust in you they don't want to support you because they've lost that trust. You just spin-out” (YP – Focus group A).

“Once you mistrust a child I think in the back of your mind, you can forgive them, but you don't forget. I still don't forget a lot of the things she said to me. Maybe I've forgiven it and said turn the other cheek. But they're still here. I know a lot of times I know she lies to me now and I think well why are you lying to me?...” (Parent – Focus group A).

“I don't know, I just felt abandoned by mum completely.” (YP – Focus group A).

Macro (Socio-cultural)

- Macro (socio-cultural) sources of conflict are the structural stresses on families, the social conditions in which conflict manifests, and the impact of intergenerational trauma and family dysfunction.

These include:

- Poverty and financial marginalisation
- Unemployment
- Unstable housing
- Family histories and experiences of dysfunction and trauma
- Mental illness and substance use

Macro (socio-cultural) examples

“I often see and I believe that there are other multilayered things that cause conflict like poverty, family violence, attachment issues, drug and alcohol. So working with families and young people [can] improve their communication, but I don't think you can ignore the contributing factors that go on in people's lives because lives are complex.” (FG - Staff).

“...all this social disadvantage and poverty and social media, they are all there but... what is missing [is] the real connection [in families], which stems from... early attachment and it goes through later on.” (FG - Staff).

Example of sources of family conflict combined

“[W]e get two really different polar opposites of conflict. So we have the minor mediation around social media and flushing the toilet and those minor issues that can be solved quite quickly and that communication can be improved, but then we have the complete opposite where ...you have so many complex issues that a lot of them are just [a symptom] of what’s going on, and that’s the difficult part. If you’ve got limited time with the family you can deal with some of those communication strategies and some of those soft skills, but some of them are so entrenched with disadvantage or generalisations of trauma and everything that’s been built up, and a lot of those issues are just too complex for many people to deal with and that’s what we come across as well.” (FG – Staff).

Conclusion

- The findings detail an in-depth understanding of how family conflict is experienced and understood by young people and their families.
- They provide some conceptual clarity of family conflict as it relates to youth homelessness – particularly for programs and practice.
- Offers a lens for workers to view and respond to family conflict in their work.