

# Boarding school and resilience\*

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*Abstract:* This paper presents some research about the reparative and damaging effects of two different types of residential home experience on the capacity to form effective relationships both within family life and at work. The first looks at the emotional effects on children and staff of living and working in a therapeutic community. The second examines the resilience of senior executives who have boarded as children and the impact of these experiences on their home lives.

*Keywords:* deprivation, separation, residential institutions, emotional intelligence, defence mechanisms, therapeutic community, attachment theory, primary provision, regression, strategic survival personality, boarding school syndrome.

## Introduction

This paper is about the experience of boarding school looked at 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 a piece of research on the resilience of senior executives who have boarded as children compared with executives who have not boarded as children. Finally some implications of those experiences are discussed, for the lives of the children in therapeutic communities, the staff in those institutions and for the experience of the senior executive.

## Background

The 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

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Defence Mechanisms Test (DMT). This consisted of the subject being shown a number of pictures using a tachistoscope 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 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 can be summed up by the work of Cooper (1988) who clarified the three basic principles of perceptual genetics:

The first is that perception develops through two qualitatively different stages, from the initial global impression to the final differentiated form. Secondly, this process is held to resemble the development of perception which occurs in childhood. Finally, every normal perception should be seen as a rapid process. 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 by the ego to cope with the anxiety generated in stressful situations. Freud (1923) argued that neurotic conflict takes place between the ego and the id. The ego tries to bar expression of certain instinctual impulses and to do this employs mechanisms of defence. These are unconscious and aim to protect the ego from pain. The defences looked at include isolation, denial, reaction formation, projection, introjection, repression, and regression. 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 (Svensson & Trygg, 1991), commercial and fighter pilots (Neuman, 1971; Torjussen & Vaernes, 1991), divers (Kragh, 1962), footballers and senior managers. It has also been used in research on subjective fear in parachute jumpers and in training for parachute jumping (Vaernes, 1982), on

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 (Armeliu et al., 1990; Hesse, 1990; Sundbom et al., 1989).

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.

### **Boarding school as a therapeutic experience: staff retention**

The first piece of research took place over 30 years ago at the Cotswold Community, a residential school for disturbed boys. The boys were often sent there as a last resort after multiple failed placements in foster care. Many of these boys had suffered disruptive attachment histories and exhibited very challenging behaviours. In this setting there was concern about the level of staff turnover and the high cost this generated because of the substantial investment in recruitment, selection, induction, training, and the several months of experience needed before a new staff member became an asset. Furthermore, high staff turnover was very disruptive to the treatment of the boys who needed both primary and secondary provision.

By this I am drawing on the work of Pip Dockar-Drysdale who was described by Beedell (1999) as “the last survivor of that influential band of mid-twentieth-century contributors to the advancement of therapeutic understanding and care of children in Britain whose work was crucially shaped by their involvement with wartime evacuees”

The other three, Anna Freud, John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott, came to this experience already trained as psychoanalysts. This particular clinical perspective influenced how they saw bereavement, separation and interruption of family life affecting the child, and what the desirable remedies were ... (Beedell, 1999)

Bowlby's (1973) work on childhood deprivation resulting from separation and loss and the resulting attachment disorders is particularly relevant.

Drysdale had worked with Winnicott and they made a conceptual distinction between pre-neurotic and neurotic children. Whilst the latter could recover through the provision of a therapeutic environment with psychotherapy, the former required the provision of primary experience. This provided the opportunity to regress to the point of parental failure and at its deepest point reached the stage at which the baby was still part of the mother (Dockar-Drysdale, 1990). This work was extremely demanding on staff as it was founded on regression, dependency, and maternal provision as specific aspects of treatment. Staff were supported and trained into this particular area of work to try and meet the needs of the children.

However, this treatment process created high levels of stress which threatened the staff members' own level of ego functioning. The major factor in an annual staff turnover of over 30% seemed to be the realisation that the threat was too cripplingly

great. There were, of course, other reasons why people either left or stayed, but perhaps this is sufficient background to describe the research that took place.

An initial pilot study of 8 staff were tested and interviewed in 1990. Although hypotheses about an individual's functioning and defence mechanisms could be generated from the DMT alone, it was impossible to give rich meaning to the data without an understanding of the subject's experiences. In addition to the DMT, the process consisted of a family sketch and interviews about formative experiences and motivation for coming to the Cotswold Community (Khaleelee, 1994).

The assumption was that people who choose to enter the helping professions as doctors, social workers, nurses, or psychologists are in part motivated by an unconscious desire to put something right within themselves. What was useful to know was that the capacities, strengths, and abilities brought to the task outweighed whatever problem areas existed within the applicant's personality. This was in order to minimise the risk that the worker would be gratifying his or her own needs at the expense of the client, or that the worker would become a casualty of the therapeutic relationship because of lack of resilience. The task was to identify both sides of this equation. The DMT and interview were designed to develop hypotheses about both elements, and emphasis was placed on the importance of looking at them in the context of the tasks to be performed at the school.

Following the pilot study which produced accurate predictions about how long those individual staff members would stay, it was decided by the Principal, John Whitwell, that all staff would be tested as part of the selection process for working at the Cotswold Community. Over time a template was developed which could accurately predict whether a potential staff member would stay for 1 year, 2 years, or the desired 3 years or more. For this the author worked in partnership with Patrick Tomlinson who was Assistant Principal and Head of Training and Development at that time.

Essentially, what this research provided, were some hypotheses about the unconscious motivation of staff coming to the Community. Those who stayed—"stayers"—tended to fall into two categories: either becoming "tough isolators", able to "cut off" from their feelings inside themselves; or those without regressive signs, who exhibited more resilient profiles and therefore did not need to use heavy isolation as a defence (Khaleelee & Tomlinson, 1997).

Later assessments for either selection or development of over 40 staff produced a clear hypothesis about the probability of a staff member staying or leaving and suggested that individuals who were either heavily defended or were undefended in certain ways, were likely to experience a high level of anxiety in the work.

Those who are heavily defended have to use more psychic energy to defend themselves against anxiety, leaving less available for coping with external reality. Those who are undefended, are open to intense external and internal pressure and may suffer high levels of anxiety. The greater the pressure, the greater the likelihood that the susceptible individual may gradually feel exhausted, overwhelmed or "burnt out", depending on their defensive structure. (Khaleelee & Tomlinson, 1997, p. 263)

The outcome of the research was that, in applying these hypotheses, staff selection was refined so that length of stay improved on average from 2.5 years to 4 years and this improvement was sustained for a number of years (Tomlinson, 2009).

Further research is currently being carried out by us in a therapeutic community in Ireland where staff turnover has been more than 50–55%. This is an extremely unsatisfactory level when trying to provide therapeutic continuity for severely damaged children.

This is a particular type of boarding school experience, one which is intended to be therapeutically reparative, and which can have the outcome of enabling a child either to live in a family setting again or, later, to manage to become a parent themselves and to have their own family. Being able to do so is a significant sign of the success of this type of therapeutic programme.

Evaluation of the work at the Cotswold Community by the Department of Health and Social Security indicated, long before this work on staff selection was implemented, that “many residents leaving the Community substantially integrated, recovered or significantly improved, and showing, on such a crude measure as reconviction rate, a figure of 10% rather than the usual 60–80%” (Allchin, 2011, p. 273).

Miller (2011), writing at the same time said:

Although Richard Balbernie was characteristically modest about his achievements, a follow-up study four years ago showed recidivism reduced from 85% to around 5%. But for the Cotswold Community literally hundreds of young men would be in and out of prison. (p. 275)

Staff also benefited from this experience of boarding school. Many of them, although highly intelligent, had for one reason or another, not achieved their full educational potential. Being in the setting of the Cotswold Community enabled them simultaneously to work through some of their own emotional problems and gave them an opportunity to mature.

### **Boarding school as an educational experience: survival**

The second piece of research related to the author’s 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.

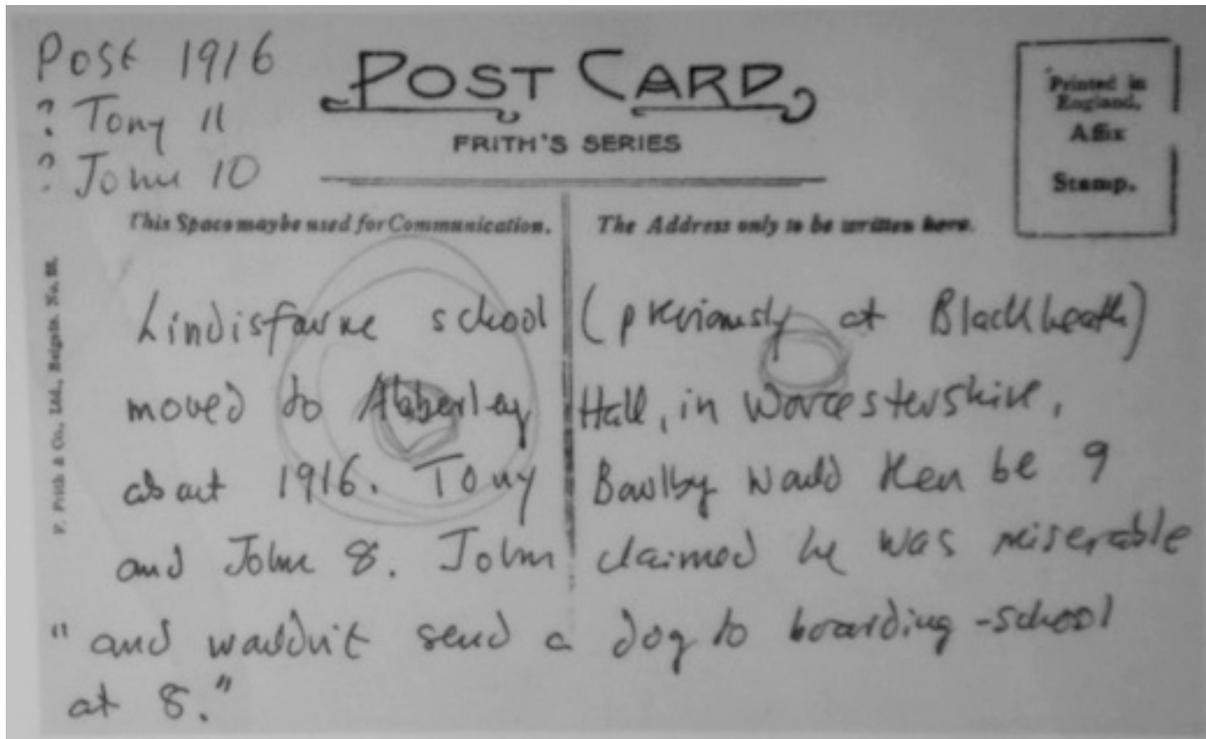
One key defence mechanism in assessing resilience is “regression”, which Winnicott (1978) clarified as representing a return to the point at which the environment has failed the individual frequently during childhood. Appropriate and consistent parental availability, love, and support are the essential 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. As the postcard reproduced on the next page confirms, Bowlby himself was an unhappy boarder from a young age.

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).



"I wouldn't send a dog to boarding school at 8" (John Bowlby),  
quoted by Ursula Bowlby on back of the postcard.

With gratitude to the Bowlby family for giving their permission to reproduce this postcard.

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, a phenomenon described by Duffell (2014) when hypothesising the development of a "Strategic Survival Personality" as a way of coping with the experience of being sent away during childhood for a prolonged period of time.

He elucidated three categories for how survivors coped: the Compliers, consisting of those who toed the line and live in denial; the Rebels, who have taken an anti-authority stance; and the Casualties, consisting of those who barely survived. Schaverien (2015) has developed this thinking and in describing the "boarding school syndrome", clarified other unconscious coping mechanisms including dissociative amnesia, resulting in a psychological split between the "home self" and the "boarding school" self. She elaborated on how this splitting continued into adult life and impacted on relationships.

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 our analysis showed that:

- 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.

### Recommendations

What can be done to ameliorate this situation? It is noticeable that the profiles of those individuals who went to boarding school but subsequently had therapy to deal with the emotional damage, tend to show less emotional damage in terms of signs of shock and levels of defensiveness. Even though most people carry scars from formative experiences, therapy helps the healing process. It fosters emotional maturing and the capacity for deep and sustained relationships with those we love.

Beyond therapy, for the individual to try to repair early emotional damage there is also the value of education in schools, colleges, parenting classes, and other settings where the importance of attachment continuity during childhood can be emphasised as a way of promoting emotional intelligence in adulthood. Media dissemination of the negative impact of early separation to boarding school on the maturity of our leaders' judgements would be another avenue to educating the public. Finally, boarding schools are not all bad and there is great value in promoting boarding school for some over-16s as a way of helping them develop their life skills, their independence, and enabling them to become mature young adults.

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