Stigma in Childhood: Let's Speak Out Loud

Fouzi Mathey Kikadidi

Abstract

This article explores various manifestations of stigma in the young and adult life of a care leaver and the multiple trauma encountered along the path of Fouzi Mathey Kikadidi, the author. Part essay, part testimonial, this article reflects on how perceptions and stereotypes can affect a young child and explores the defense mechanisms and tools used to overcome it. It highlights different approaches to deal with stigma and invites to a joint reflexion on how children in care could repossess their own history.

Keywords

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Introduction

All societies assign tags to people in order to categorise them and sanction those whom behaviours don't frame within the `ordinary and natural' attributes defined by social groups (Goffman, 1963). The process of stigmatisation starts when the individual's difference is perceived and linked to a negative stereotype, further leading to ostracism and discrimination for the individual being labelled (Link and Phelan, 2001). For children leaving care, the experience of discrimination can have multiple aspects. Children leaving care can be subjected to `the crossfire of social judgement' (Eribon, 2010, p. 202) and can feel antagonised on multiple levels: ethnic origins, declining social status, sexuality and religion, to name a few.

A broad range of sociologists and psychologists have been working on stigmas in the childcare system. After a first peer research on children leaving care (Robin, 2012), all the researchers and I wanted to go further into the topic of stigmas that we had already developed: adulthood was perceived as a time where young people experienced `hybridisation' (Jacquet, 2014, p. 38), having to master a complex inheritance and experiencing an identity wounded and smashed into inconsistent and inseparable elements (Pollak, 1993, p. 43). This said, we wondered how trans-cultural foster care could lead to stigmatisation and how it did affect children in the care system? This research is still ongoing and through this short essay, I wanted to show you two examples of my own stigmas and what types of troubles it cost me in my early years and my now-adult life. Finally, I will tell you how I overcame those stigmas.

Encounters with stigmatisation

My first encounter with stigmatisation occurred at the age of seven, when I confessed to my foster family that the director of my school had put his hands on my intimate parts. Following that confession, I remember going to the police station to give my testimonial and feeling scrutinised and ashamed. I could sense the disbelief in the policeman's eyes. I could feel that I was just a little black girl, an immigrant who couldn't live with her parents because they were probably poor or, as many Africans are, and here I quote several people I met in my life `system profiteers who like to breed in order to get social allowances'. Therefore, how could I tell the truth when I came from such an upbringing? Although I was only seven years old, I could feel it strongly and it made me doubt myself. My fears were quickly confirmed when all my teachers, who used to adore me as I was a good pupil and a gentle little girl, started to say that I was spreading lies and surely it was due to my rough background. I was quickly withdrawn from this school. My biological father wanted to sue the director but, and I never knew why, no charges were retained against him. I was a living example of this `intercultural difference' (Ayoun, 1993) that would justify this lack of action and quickness to dismiss my testimonial.

This sad experience would haunt me for a while. I felt like in The Scarlet Letter: I was suddenly marked with the letter A. This tag will follow me throughout my childhood, even though my new classmates didn't know about it. Memories fade away and are quickly transformed by our own feelings and ability to rewrite our story. My memory of this event stayed impeccable: I can still remember everything that happened and even his name, but this memory was tarnished during several years by my own guilt. Was I a victim or was it normal for a child like me — abandoned by her own family, the only black person in this small-minded Loire valley village — to experience this kind of trauma? Years of therapy helped me to overcome it, although it took a long time for me to accept my body and to feel comfortable with my sexuality.

At the age of sixteen years old, I decided to take action and started fighting for human rights in different NGOs (Amnesty International, UNICEF) and different local or international institutions (Paris Youth Town Council, PIMUN). I travelled around the world, enrolled in a soup kitchen in central China, gave mentoring in various schools of the Cape Town townships and then joined SOS Children's Villages to concentrate on children's rights through first peer research and then European training on the International Convention for Children's Rights. I was invited for lunch with our former president François Hollande, was consulted by multiple ministries, was seen as a specialist on these issues… But I was still crashing in my friends' apartments, finding no jobs after what is supposedly a very good academic path, and never offered a job by all these institutions, the same that would tell me how brilliant I was and how fortunate it was to work with me. I want to point out that for almost all these jobs I was a volunteer, which I always found unfair as I would sometimes do the same type of work as the public servants working in the ministries who were being paid to do so. I wondered if my social status which seemed to be valued with not a sign of stigmatisation anymore, was only a mere attempt at instrumentalising myself and gaining more credentials (i.e. `yes, we listen to the children living in care!')? As if it was good to have me as a `witness', a `young expert', but not as a person capable to earn a living with it.

This stigma was really hard to overcome, and still is, but it made me realise that the fight was to important to stop.

Speaking out loud

We children from the childcare system will always face tremendous stigmas if we don't speak out loud and if we remain invisible. I have been hiding my upbringing for many years, being vague when asked questions about my childhood and feeling ashamed of where I came from. I was adapting myself to every social group I was invited into, able to spend time with technocrats, bourgeois or even homeless people. I was a `chameleon' (Robin, 2012) and one good thing I can extract from those years of stigmatisation is that it helped me,

through my encounters, to overcome my social status and succeed in non-reproduction (Jacquet, 2014).

A great example of youth participation comes from my own country, France. Fifty nine years ago saw the foundation of an organisation called ADEPAPE. This organisation was written in the French Code of Social Action and Families and formed a mandatory office in each French department. One important rule was that it had to be led by adults formerly placed in care. These organisations are financed by each department and allows young people leaving care to get financial aid, moral support and social links with their peers. These types of organisations implementing peer-to-peer approaches are important as they permit young people to create innovative ways to deal with their issues in a safe environment with people understanding their needs and talking at the `same level' — as, often, those organisations are led by young people from 18 to 30 years old.

I have been volunteering in some ADEPAPE for the last five years, revitalising the ADEPAPE 92, near Paris and creating the ADEPAPE 94, in the Val-de-Marne department. We work with social workers, we fund professional training for young people, we pay for their studies, we create activities and we even work as advocates for children's rights. Being with peers empowers us to raise issues that social workers and political members would not think of straight away and at the same time, we don't feel pressured to act a certain way that would seem more appropriate: we make our own rules and navigate into the political world with fresh ideas and a `let's just speak our minds' attitude that is necessary if you want to change things.

Looking ahead

In Canada, you can also find the same types of organisations with a different degree of involvement from the states and municipalities but with the same core value: making young people agents of their lives and specialists of their own situations. I wish other countries, like Scotland, will do the same and I invite for a joint reflexion on how to implement such organisations: I do think that each social sciences department at the universities should create more peer researches and as a rule should always put young adults from care in their steering comities for example.

I've always vowed for a shift in society, a change of paradigm and more tolerance towards our differences. Stigmas only exist by the systematic categorisation of social groups and definition of attributes, often labelled by the highest members of each social group. The only way we can stop it is by accompanying children in the acceptance of their differences and help them `speak out loud'.

About the author

Fouzi Mathey Kikadidi is a public policy consultant in a consultancy agency based in Paris and specialising in the social and public health sectors. She is also a member of the advisory board for the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures, at CELCIS and has been a peer researcher for the Université Paris Est Creteil for more than 7 years now. She is a children's rights trainer for SOS Children's Villages and has been helping Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children to engage with civil society and government in France. She holds a BA in Business Administration and a Masters Degree in Educational Sciences.

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