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A dialogical narrative approach to transitions and change in young women's lives after domestic abuse in childhood: considerations for counselling and psychotherapy

Tanya Frances

School of Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

Domestic abuse in childhood is seriously impactful, but very little literature uses a critical lens to consider implications for counsellors and psychotherapists working with young adults following domestic abuse in childhood. This article draws on research that explored 10 young women's accounts of transitions to adulthood after domestic abuse in childhood. Interviews with young adult women in England were conducted and a feminist dialogical narrative analysis was used. Findings suggest that socio-cultural structures and ideologies that shape dominant discourses about what growing up after domestic abuse in childhood means, and what "successful" adult femininity looks like, shaped how women made sense of their experiences. This has implications for counsellors and psychotherapists working with this client group. This article concludes that storytelling could be a powerful therapeutic tool, and attention to power, ambiguity and tensions when working with this client group might facilitate and generate important meaning-making and knowledge in therapy.

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Introduction

Domestic abuse is a widespread issue that spans social, political and personal domains. This article conceptualises domestic abuse as underpinned by gendered and patriarchal structures which enable and characterise controlling patterns of behaviour that cannot always be counted by "acts" or "incidents" (Stark & Hester, 2019; Walby & Towers, 2017). It includes physical, emotional, psychological, financial/economic and sexual abuse, and controlling, coercive, surveillance behaviours (Austin, 2021; Stark & Hester, 2019). Crime Survey of England and Wales data shows that 2.4 million adults aged 16–74 as recorded in 2020 were victims of domestic abuse (Office for National Statistics, 2020). However, these figures are under-representative as they do not account for context, impact and gendered dynamics of repeat victimisation (Walby & Towers, 2017). The frequency and severity of violence and abuse worsened through the Covid-19 pandemic (Williamson et al., 2020) as perpetrators used the circumstances and restrictions of the pandemic as further mechanisms of control (Davidge, 2020).

People who have experienced domestic abuse may seek formal support in a range of services, including healthcare, social care, housing, refuge and psychological/mental health services. However, specialist domestic abuse service provision is "patchy", subject to a "postcode lottery",

CONTACT Tanya Frances  tanya.frances@open.ac.uk  School of Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK

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and often reliant on short-term funding and commissioning (Action for Children, 2019). These services have been significantly hit by funding cuts in the UK (Hawkins & Taylor, 2015; Sanders-McDonagh et al., 2016) and minoritised people disproportionately face greater barriers to service access (Sandhu & Stephenson, 2015; Thiara & Harrison, 2021).

Due to the lack of specialist services, high prevalence rates and significant impacts of domestic abuse, it is likely people seek formal emotional and psychological support in generalised services (Roddy & Gabriel, 2019). They might seek counselling or psychotherapy for anxiety, depression, or trauma-related symptoms (Howard & Arbaugh, 2019; Roddy, 2013) without necessarily presenting with domestic abuse as the primary issue. Additionally, recent political and social justice movements that have been visible in mainstream media, such as #MeToo (Lazard, 2020) and #WhyIStayed (Storer et al., 2021) mean more people may come forward to seek support after experiencing violence, including domestic abuse (Howard & Arbaugh, 2019). As such, therapists, regardless of specialism, may likely work with those who have experienced domestic abuse. However, counsellors and psychotherapists do not typically receive training in domestic abuse and may not be adequately prepared to assess for and name domestic abuse when it comes up in therapy (Howard & Arbaugh, 2019; Roddy, 2013).

In the context of counselling adults who have experienced domestic abuse, therapists' inattention to issues of abuse in the form of failing to notice, acknowledge or name abuse as abuse, can have harmful consequences. These may include revictimising clients (Hattendorf & Tollerud, 2009; Howard & Arbaugh, 2019), which may result clients feeling unable to disclose again or seek alternative help (Roddy, 2013), or clients potentially terminating therapy early (Roddy & Gabriel, 2019). Information on counselling and psychotherapy with young adults who experienced domestic abuse in childhood is scarce. Given that approximately 25% of adults in the UK have reported parental domestic abuse in childhood (Radford et al., 2011), with significant, serious and long-lasting adverse effects (Howarth et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2017), it is highly likely therapists will be working with these clients.

Children have previously been referred to as "silent witnesses" or "invisible victims" (Osofsky, 1995), and many scholars have demonstrated that in the face of domestic abuse, children may have agentic ways of coping (Callaghan et al., 2015). Specifically, they often actively participate in theirs and their mother's recoveries during and in the aftermath of domestic abuse (Katz, 2015). Furthermore, they may use various strategies to resist violence, manage their familial relationships and attempt to seek safety (Överlien, 2017; Överlien & Hydén, 2009). Recognising children as directly involved and impacted by the strategies used by perpetrators of domestic abuse is important. Katz (2019) has considered the relationship of the children and the parent who has experienced abuse as significant and impacted by the actions and controlling strategies of the perpetrator. Importantly, it is documented that perpetrators can often use the nonabusive parent-child relationship as a means of exerting control over the adult victim and the child (Katz et al., 2020). This means that whether it is pre and/or post-separation abuse, when children are directly entwined in family relationships where there is domestic abuse, there are multiple and complex ways that children's lives are impacted by domestic abuse. These impacts can be understood by attending to context, such as the actions/strategies of the perpetrator, gender ideologies, power and control (Davies et al., 2009; Nicolson, 2019) and not solely determined by the characteristics or factors relating to the individual child.

In the UK, children have only recently been legally recognised as direct victims of domestic abuse when the Domestic Abuse Act (UK Government, 2021) was published. This legal recognition marked a significant shift in UK legislation. However, it is also known that the negative impacts of domestic abuse in childhood can last well into adulthood (Howarth et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2017), and parental domestic abuse does not necessarily end once the person reaches adulthood (Frances, 2023a) or when/if parents separate (Humphreys & Thiara, 2003). Existing literature about young adults who experienced domestic abuse in childhood tends to focus on characteristics or experiences that predict outcomes. For example, factors contributing to resiliency, such as age, gender, sibling

order, mother–child attachment functioning and severity of violence (Howell & Miller-Graff, 2014). Whilst predictors of resiliency are helpful, this present study is concerned with experiences as told by young adults, with the understanding that sometimes categorisation and outcomes-focused research risks overlooking nuance, complexity, and context. Contextualising accounts of domestic abuse is central to understanding lived experiences, particularly as domestic abuse is underpinned by patterns of control and dynamics of power which are situated within socio-structural conditions which enable and maintain patterns of control. Thus, understanding and attending to context and lived experience is important.

A small number of qualitative retrospective studies have been conducted in Canada, Australia and the US with adults who experienced domestic violence in childhood with a focus on resilience (Alaggia & Donohue, 2018; Anderson & Danis, 2006; Gonzales et al., 2012; Jenney et al., 2016; O'Brien et al., 2013) proposing that some children evidence resilience, and others do not. Again, while understanding resilience can be useful, a focus on resilience or coping limits the space for people to express how transitions to adulthood are experienced beyond those factors. One recent study explored the experiences of young adults with a broader focus on meanings assigned to childhood experiences of domestic abuse, rather than specifically on resilience or coping. Dumont and Lessard (2020) examined Canadian young adults' meaning making in relation to childhood experiences of domestic abuse. Their work diverges from existing qualitative literature with young adults as it does not centre around coping or resilience, offering some unique insights. They suggest that development consists of multiple factors for young adults over the life course. They found that the meanings people make of their childhood experiences are shaped by several factors that are unique to them such as friendships, education and work (Dumont & Lessard, 2020). Their findings indicate that developmental transitions in the context of those who experience domestic abuse in childhood are more nuanced, complex, individual and relational.

The transition to young adulthood is important, in terms of identity and meaning-making (Crafter et al., 2019). Drawing on Zittoun's (2007) socio-cultural theory of transitions, transitions are fluid periods of change, involving social relocations and the construction and reconstruction of knowledge and meaning making (Zittoun, 2007). This way of understanding child to young adult transitions is particularly useful for this research, as instead of understanding child to adult transitions as individual de-contextualised processes that are age-based and stage-based, this theorisation shifts attention to transitions as dynamic processes, shaped by socio-cultural contexts (Crafter et al., 2019). Understanding domestic abuse requires an approach which extends beyond the individual person and can attend to both the individual experience *and* socio-structural conditions, power inequalities and relationships (Nicolson, 2019). This conceptualisation of transitions supported my intention to attend to both individual lived experience and the contexts within which domestic abuse occurs and is discussed.

Narratives and storytelling

This article draws on qualitative research with 10 women. I used a voice-centred narrative methodology with two overarching aims: (a) to explore young women's accounts of transitions to young adulthood after domestic abuse in childhood and (b) to explore the role of multiple narrative resources in shaping young women's accounts of transitions to young adulthood after domestic abuse in childhood. The questions this paper addresses are: How do young women narrate their transitions to young adulthood after domestic abuse in childhood, and what are the implications for counselling and psychotherapy? What narrative resources shape how young women tell their stories, and what are the implications for counselling and psychotherapy?

I used a narrative approach in this research, starting with the premise that lives are storied, and it is through stories that we make meaning out of experiences and construct a sense of self (Frank, 2010). "Narratives" refers to a form of social code, informed by the understanding that social and

cultural contexts play a powerful role in shaping how people story the self and make sense of their experiences (Hermans, 2001). “Narratives” refer to the resources that people draw on in order to tell their stories, which I refer to in this article as narrative resources (Frank, 2005). I also use the term “stories” and “storytelling” to refer to the practice of talking about a lived experience, or providing accounts or reflections of events, past, current or in the imagined future (Hermans, 2001). “Stories” can be understood as told through, and shaped by, existing narrative frameworks and resources.

In this article, I first outline the narrative resources that I found to shape women’s storytelling practices. Secondly, as there is currently a significant lack of literature addressing how this client group may be supported in counselling and psychotherapy, I consider what these findings might mean for therapists who work with young adults who have experienced domestic abuse in childhood. There is little evidence regarding how to support those navigating this transition after domestic abuse if they present as a client in therapy as most literature focuses on counselling or psychotherapy for the adult victim-survivor. I use the term “therapist” to cover counsellors, psychotherapists and other psychotherapeutic professions who provide psychological therapy to individuals.

Methods

Procedure

Participants were interviewed for 75 to 135 minutes. Interviews took place in various locations, as chosen by participants, including phone, video calls, university interview rooms, private library rooms, or participants’ homes. I used an open narrative interviewing style and invited participants to share their experiences of domestic abuse during childhood and consider what their experiences meant to them in young adulthood.

Participants

Ten women, aged 21–35, living in England, participated in this study. Participants were recruited via social media using a call for participants on Twitter. Eligible people were invited to contact me via email to express their interest or ask any questions. On initial contact, I emailed study information sheets which invited them to have a short phone call with me to discuss the aims and purpose of the study, and ascertain eligibility to participate, and that they met the inclusion criteria (experienced domestic abuse in childhood, considered themselves in “young adulthood”, were 16 or above, and that it was currently safe for them to participate). I offered the opportunity for participants to ask any questions and provided time for people to decide if they wanted to participate further. If they agreed, I sent a study consent form and an interview topic guide. We set up a suitable time and place for the interview. Participants were interviewed after providing written informed consent.

Participants all experienced domestic abuse in childhood, and most had experienced other forms of abuse too, such as physical, sexual and emotional abuse in addition to parental domestic abuse. Participants were diverse in terms of class backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds and types of abuse experienced, but in terms of ethnicity, gender and education, all but one were white, all were women, and most participants were educated up to degree level.

Ethics

This study received ethical approval from The University of Stirling’s General University Ethics Committee. Given the sensitivity of this research and potential vulnerability of participants, ethical issues were strongly considered. Participant identifying information has been altered, and pseudonyms have been used in this article.

Written Informed consent was obtained from participants. Consent was continuously sought by offering multiple opportunities from recruitment to completion of the interview for participants to ask questions, choose how much or little they disclosed during interview, and/or withdraw their consent if they wished. If it became clear participants were distressed during interview, I offered opportunities to pause or stop if they wished. Some participants became tearful, but none wanted to stop the interview. A couple of participants opted to take a pause half-way through. Most participants expressed positive experiences of the interview. For some, although the interview was the first time they had spoken so openly about their experiences, they found it therapeutic to tell their story, feel heard, contribute to research, or use their experiences for good.

Given the importance of safety in this research, confidentiality and anonymity were given the utmost importance. In reporting findings, I have taken care to anonymise participant information and stories so that no names, identifiable locations, or specific details risk revealing participants' identities. Considering the researcher-participant relationship was also an ethical issue. I am also a counsellor and psychotherapist, and I used those skills in my approach with each participant. As I noted, most participants reported it felt therapeutic to tell their story and be heard. This is not uncommon in research, and the links between qualitative research interviews and psychotherapy have been documented as both are projects of meaning-making, both involve talking about topics that are potentially difficult to talk about, and both involve a "listener" and a "teller" (Bondi, 2013; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Hydén, 2014). In order to maintain a researcher-participant relationship with participants, I ensured I was clear with participants about the boundaries of the research interview, and I did not attempt to intervene with explicit therapeutic interventions. Rather, I maintained focused on the research aims, even though it became clear that one cannot entirely leave therapeutic skills and values "out of the door" (Bondi & Fewell, 2017) and potentially, drawing on some of these skills made for a sensitive approach to the research interview.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed, and the Listening Guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, 2015) was used to conduct a voice-centred narrative analysis. The Listening Guide is a feminist narrative voice-centred method (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Gilligan, 2015) consisting of three "listening". The first listening involves listening for the "self". This is a reflexive listening whereby I read transcripts and kept margin notes and a research journal documenting what resonated with me and where aspects of stories aligned with parts of my own. The second listening is to listen for the plot/storyline. I read transcripts, tracing storylines and taking notes of what was happening in the participants' account, the key events, people and relationships. The third listening is to listen for contrapuntal voices. This means voices, or subjectivities, that co-exist in the participants' account. For example, where a participant talks about conflicting thoughts or feelings, or presents multiple ways of making sense of an experience. On the third listening, the Listening Guide asks the researcher to produce I poems. This is where text is broken up to "I statements", with each statement starting with "I" requires a new stanza in a poem. This listening helped me to tune into shifts in storylines, attending to voice as multiple, rather than singular (Sermijn et al., 2008).

After transcribing interviews and constructing voice poems, a dialogical narrative approach (Frank, 2010; Hermans, 2001) was used to analyse data. A dialogical approach assumes that the self is not a single unitary subject, and attends to selfhood and voice as multiple (Hermans, 2001). Using Hermans (2008) dialogical theory of the self, I was guided by four key assumptions about how the self is constituted in and through the stories we tell about ourselves. The first of the four assumptions is "The-other-in-self". This refers to the idea that the stories we tell are never entirely our "own" – rather, some are "borrowed in parts" (Frank, 2012, p. 36) from the cultural and narrative resources that shape our experiences. In other words, we tell stories about ourselves that are shaped

by both “inner” voices and “external” voices. An emphasis on both internal and external forces enables a focus on how the two are inextricably linked, and how personal stories are situated in socio-structural contexts. The second assumption is “multiplicity in unity”, referring to the idea that the self is multi-vocal and always in dialogue; rejecting the idea of a single unitary core self, and instead, working with the assumption that when we talk about ourselves, we tell many stories, not just one. The third assumption is “dominance and social power”, understanding that people do not speak from decontextualised, isolated and neutral social and cultural spaces, but individual voices are shaped “by the culture of institutions, groups, and communities in which they participate, including their power differences” (Hermans, 2001, p. 193). The fourth assumption is “innovation”, referring to the idea that humans have the capacity to change, innovate and renew, and people can position and reposition themselves through the stories that they tell. There is a key focus in this theory on polyvocality and power. Attention to polyvocality and power was an important for this study, because often when women talk about abuse or traumatic experiences, their accounts risk being flattened out to a single storyline, neglecting the multiplicity of their stories and identities (Alcoff, 2018; Woodiwiss, 2007).

Drawing on these four assumptions, the analysis involved working through the I poems to explore how different voices existed in dialogue with each other. A more detailed account of how I worked with poems can be found in a previous publication (Frances, 2023b). To develop the analysis, I asked which narrative resources I saw as shaping each voice, and how power played a part in shaping what was said, what was not said and how. I took notes as I worked through the lines of the I poems, noting down both the inner and external forces that I understood as shaping the different voices from which participants spoke from. I returned to the full transcripts often so as not to lose context of the I poems. Drawing on Frank’s (2012) guidance for conducting dialogical narrative analysis, I developed three narrative typologies, which described the types of stories participants told. These were: Transitions, Recoveries and Battles: Stories of Struggle and Survival. The focus of this article is on how women storied transitions; therefore, this article explores the narrative typology of transitions. There were three themes within this typology, which this article explores.

I align the approach I took in this research with feminist and interpretivist paradigms (Clarke & Braun, 2019), meaning that how I engage with issues relating to trustworthiness is underpinned by the assumption that analysis is subjective and situated, and it is not an objective and neutral process (Bondi & Fewell, 2017). Reflexivity is therefore an important part of ensuring trustworthiness of the analysis, and as such it feels important to locate myself within the article. The present research was a PhD research project which I conducted with the guidance and support of three supervisors and a small number of peers who offered their feedback and discussion throughout the analytical process. I also approached the research with my own experiences of violence, meaning that I had a personal interest, and my own story to be mindful of throughout. At the time of conducting the research, I was in my late 20s. I am a white cisgender woman with no visible disabilities. I engaged deeply with participants’ accounts and my own reflexivity, and I aim to provide transparent accounts of the research process and the analysis.

Findings: transitions to young adulthood after domestic abuse in childhood

This section provides an exploration of the narrative typology “transitions”, which captures how women in this study spoke about their transitions to young adulthood after childhood domestic abuse. I developed three themes within this narrative typology; “Getting older, growing up and speaking out”, “When new stories are hopeful and old stories are heavy” and “Bridging old and new stories in the quest for authenticity”.

My analysis does not assume homogeneity amongst participants’ accounts, but it is an intention to highlight where there were similar features, patterns and narrative resources shaping participants’ accounts. I then discuss these three story types in relation to broader systems (such as socio-cultural,

relational, familial) that shape these accounts, and consider what these findings mean for psychotherapeutic practice.

Getting older, growing up and speaking out

Participants told stories of growing up and becoming an adult. For example, using her voice to speak out was storied as a key feature of Sochi's adult identity.

I just despised the man so much, I just really really did. I think even at that age, I think I just kind of kept my mouth shut and just kind of like got on with it really ... I was at an age where I was too young to really be able to speak my opinion on that situation properly (Sochi)

Being a child meant she was "too young" to voice her opinion, and this was in opposition to stories of speaking out in adulthood.

as an adult I find that very very difficult, like I can't ignore things, erm, having done that as a child for so long over so many different things, erm, I now find it almost impossible to ignore things, erm, and just pretend that everything is fine cos obviously I didn't have any say in that. (Sochi)

Speaking out and using her voice against injustices is central to Sochi's adult identity. The strength of her voice in adulthood is storied as related to not being able to speak out in childhood. The voice of despise she felt in childhood about her mother's partner was storied as a silent despise, whereas as an adult, it becomes impossible to "pretend that everything is fine" when it is not. The transition to adulthood as pivotal in her capacity to use her voice and take action. Narrative resources of adulthood independence enabled Sochi to write herself into a capable, independent adult, bolstered by the way that childhood is constructed as a time of passivity. For example, being "too young to speak my opinion properly" is a story of childhood when she lacked the authority to have a valued opinion that was taken seriously by adults. As an adult speaker, this story of growing up offered empowerment and a sense of self in adulthood that is centred around justice and speaking her mind.

Growing up enables space to take action in ways that can be recognised by others. Sochi recalled an instance when her mum's partner was physically violent on her sixteenth birthday.

it was my 16th birthday and I was out and I received a call from my mum and she was like 'oh where are you?' and she told me what happened – she had been on the sofa and they were arguing and he dragged her off the sofa, which she then tried to run out of the house, he dragged her back inside the house and got on top of her and was going to punch her but then something clicked and he didn't and then he stormed off out of the house so then she called me ... So obviously I'd come back and they stayed together after that again. So again it was the whole swallow what I think. And I did say this time, oh what I thought. But again this time, not my place, if that's what you wanna do like, what can I do? But erm, the second time again they'd had an argument, we'd just had dinner. I think I took my plate back to the kitchen and was washing up and then when I came back my mum was like 'oh I can't believe you just did that' and he had whacked her around the head with a newspaper – erm, and I just lost my shit (slight laugh) cos I was just like, oh I'd had enough. Ended up squaring up at him with him right directly in my face. (Sochi)

This story was framed by turning 16, suggesting that Sochi's older age enabled her to speak out and take action, "squaring" her dad up. Attending to the multi-vocality of Sochi's account suggests it is not only age that was a factor in her negotiation of power but also the growing anger she felt in relation to her mum's partner (e.g. "I just lost my shit ... I'd had enough" and "you can't get away with doing this shit").

Speaking out and taking action was also a central feature of Frances' account. Frances had been let down by services and professionals, by disclosing the abuse to them, but she was not believed. She wanted to go back to services to provide feedback.

I would never want anyone to experience what I went through or the feelings that I had to endure or the behaviour that I was subjected to. I'd never want anyone to go through that. And the way I could do it is by going back to the services and giving them some feedback. But then on the flipside I just think, well what's the point? They

let me down before, they're not gonna take my feedback seriously. And that trust isn't there. And that almost kind of – on their part I don't want to cooperate with them because I'm angry with them, but then I want to be able to help others (Frances)

Frances wanted to make sure others do not experience the same as her. Using her experience for good in order to help others is framed as central to a “growing up” story where she has chosen “the better life”. However, a stable story of resilience in young adulthood is at odds with the anger that is also voiced. Anger becomes less speakable, existing on the margins or becoming silenced in favour of this readable account of resilience. Frances did not feel she could put her anger to use because she was “too” angry – she was not ready and did not see the point. While her age status in some way legitimised her authority to provide feedback to services, her anger risked de-stabilising the stability of her account.

Age also shaped how Clara narrated growing up whereby turning 18 meant that she finally had “no tie” to her dad and she could be “done” with him.

naturally you go and see your dad. You know, you have contact, it seems the right thing to do in those ... I don't wanna say in those days cos it sounds like a really long time ago, and it wasn't. But it did seem like the right thing to do, to go see him, and actually it wasn't. And I think she (mum) felt a lot of pressure from him for us to go see him, so it just became a natural thing for us to go and see him, erm, but it was definitely a release to kind of finally say “I'm done. I don't wanna do this anymore”. And even more so at 18 when I finally had no tie to him whatsoever, although I did – cos we asked him for that money. And even now, he's bringing me into it and I'm not even a part of it (Clara)

Becoming an adult was marked by turning 18, when Clara decided she did not want contact with her dad, but turning 18 did not mean contact with her dad stopped. Her family still needed financial input from him, and each time her mum asked her dad for money, her dad brings them to court and Clara becomes caught up in the dynamics that she wanted to be free from. From this view, growing up is not simply marked by age but it is relational too. Clara's account suggests a tension between independence and dependence. She stated, “I'm done ... I don't wanna do this anymore” and “I finally had no tie to him”. However, through another voice, she articulated, “although I did”, and “He's bringing me into it”. Then, her voice of independence re-asserted the story of autonomy and adulthood by stating, “I'm not even a part of it”. The story she told was a story of asserting autonomy and independence but through a web of control that her dad still maintained in the family system.

An age-based growing up narrative framework also shaped how Clara explained that her ways of coping with the domestic abuse changed as she grew older.

Clara: There was a lot going on. I guess yeah it was easier to run away than fight it most of the time. Yeah, and it's interesting cos at high school that stopped. All of a sudden I become a teenager and it was like you know, very much reality - I definitely didn't use the escapism route in high school – definitely not.

Int: do you know what changed for you?

Clara: ermm I don't know. I don't know if it was a hormonal thing, or ... I don't know. Maybe I just grew up. It sort of stopped at like, I was about [pause] I don't know how old you are when you go into year 8? 12 ish. Yeah that's when it all kind of stopped. It was like I just grew up immediately.

Int: what stopped?

Clara: just that escapism. That ability to run away from stuff just stopped. I had this very real realisation that I was a grown up and I needed to cope with stuff even though I was still really young.

While adulthood and childhood are narrated as separate entities, there is a blurring of child and adult positions in this story, where on one hand, Clara “was a grown up and I needed to cope with stuff”, but she also said, “I was still really young”. Growing up means you need to “cope with stuff”, but “growing up” is hard when you are “still really young” and there is “a lot going on”. This points to the fluid and dynamic way that child-to-adult transition is narrated, even though normative narrative frameworks about what adults are expected to do and at which point you become an adult, shape the account.

When new stories are hopeful and old stories are heavy

Participants' future stories were shaped by stories of the past. For example, Liv spoke about difficulties with her mental health, but despite these difficulties, she spoke about wanting things to be better in the future.

I've been quite depressed the past couple of years ... but I don't want just to resign myself to how I am now. I want to put plans in place because I know I'm not always gonna feel this way, or I hope I'm not (Liv)

Liv's account of the future was shaped by a voice of hope that things can be different. She said, "I want to put plans in place ... I know I'm not always gonna feel this way ... I hope I'm not". However, her voice of hope was constrained by her difficult past, which challenges the belief that things can change. When talking about the possibility of things getting better, her story fell to a place of doubt, pushing back against the voice of hope and change. On the one hand, she said: "I know I'm not always gonna feel this way", suggesting a sense of certainty about the future. However, immediately afterwards is a voice of doubt that stated, "I hope I'm not". These coexisting voices produce a tension in Liv's account that shows the challenge of telling a consistent story of the future, where change is possible, when stories of the past carry weight.

There is a sense that Liv is still in the process and her journey is not yet complete. Her story of transition enables her to locate herself as somewhere in the middle, a place where change is still possible. Liv's statement, "I don't just want to resign myself to how I am now" can be viewed as a negotiation of power where stories of the future enable a voice of resistance against stories of the past. A further illustration of this is when Liv stated, "I was looking at this PhD but then I have really bad social anxiety ...". She expanded on her story of the future further.

- Liv: I feel like people can see – I feel like I wear my childhood on me. I feel like people think I'm a weirdo and stuff, and yeah. It puts me off like, mixing with people really ... I would have pursued this career – but I struggled cos people said oh if you wanna get anywhere you're going to have to make contacts. And I was like oh, I'm never gonna make any contacts. You know? I didn't pursue it, but yeah I'd have like a partner and I'd be more financially stable. I think I used to be really good with finances and stuff but now I've kind of fallen into the same trap as my mum and I'm just terrified that I'm gonna end up [pause]
- Int: it feels like you're in a trap? Like for you the same trap as your mum?
- Liv: yeah, kind of like she's a black hole and I'm being dragged into it
- Int: do you know what's dragging you into it?
- Liv: just the way I've been brought up and it feels like I hit a load of blocks all the time. Even with jobs and stuff and you've got to be outgoing and I just feel like [sighs] ... It all weighs heavy on you. Like [pause] it's actually really hard to describe, but I feel like others can see it and I feel like it makes me different. And I feel like it's like a tie – that I'm gonna end up like that. I do pick bad relationships and stuff - and I don't even notice I'm doing it sometimes.

Through her account, Liv's future self can be different. She would "have a partner" and "be more financially stable". However, Liv's sense that her mum is "a black hole and I'm being dragged into it" suggests that her past story is hard to move away from; it has a pull that Liv narrated as almost impossible to leave because "it's a tie", she is "different" and it all "weighs heavy on you". Further to this, there is also a voice of self-responsibilisation that can be seen through Liv's I statements, "I do pick bad relationships ... I don't even notice I am doing it sometimes", suggesting that while there is an inevitability about the "pull" of the black hole, there is also a sense of self-responsibility to create a better life for herself.

Nadine also spoke of the future whilst highlighting the impact of her past. She spoke about difficulties with her mental health and admissions to psychiatric hospitals, detailing interactions with a nurse during an admission.

I really struggled with one nurse who would say like, if I was angry she would just say "well you're just being like your dad now aren't you?" And I just think that was one of the worst things I could have heard at that point ... that would make it a bit more ingrained. You're being like him so therefore you're going to turn out like him. And then once when, because I was asking like "well, if my childhood wasn't normal? What is normal?" I wanted to

know – not challenging them but I wanted to know what you would normally do with a baby like when they are this age. But then she would say “well you could never have children” and I said why? She said “well because you would treat them like you were treated” (Nadine)

Nadine’s story positions the nurse’s assumptions as harmful by acknowledging “that was one of the worst things I could have heard”. However, Nadine also considered that maybe the nurse was “right”:

I took it on as she’s right because I wouldn’t know how to treat a child. It doesn’t mean – I don’t think that I’d, I’d hope that I wouldn’t have it in me to do what he did. I don’t think I’m that sort of person, but to be told that so directly that you should never have children because you’ll end up like him and you’ll treat them like he did because that’s what you think is right ... that’s still in there. I still don’t feel like I should have children (Nadine)

From one voice, Nadine accepted the nurse’s narrative about her; that she would not know how to treat a child and she should not have children in case she turns out like her dad. However, from another voice, Nadine rejected that narrative through tentative statements: “I don’t think ... I’d hope ... I don’t think I’m that sort of person”. Hesitancy points to the challenge of articulating a voice that diverges from expert narratives that hold power.

While Nadine was not a parent, other participants centred transitions stories around becoming a parent. For example, Bethany highlighted a sense of being lost:

I find myself reading loads about parenting and I felt really lost. Well I didn’t have the ideal childhood and I don’t know what to copy. I don’t know how to do this or how to make a home, and so I found it like a massive learning curve to almost fake it, you know. So I’m in that process, it’s becoming real as time goes on - the more I act as if it is. But it’s certainly been a process of pretending what you think a regular family is like, you know, just my childhood was not regular. I think I’ve really been aware since I’ve had her [child] that it [parenting] doesn’t come naturally to me. (Bethany)

The transition to motherhood offered Bethany a narrative possibility of doing mothering differently, even though to do things differently to her own mother was positioned as unnatural and unknown. Finding becoming a mother an overwhelming experience is not uncommon, but becoming a mother had a particular meaning for Bethany when it was storied as a new identity that intersects with a history of domestic abuse in childhood. Bethany’s struggles in navigating this transition were made sense of by attributing her sense of being lost in motherhood to her lack of a “regular” childhood. Through Bethany’s storytelling, the self as a mother was constructed relationally, and her position as a mother was intertwined with her account of being mothered. On the one hand, her account attributed struggles to the past, and at the same time, the past offered something useful to her, providing knowledge that enables her to engage in a “learning curve” to do things differently.

Bridging old and new stories in the quest for authenticity

Participants acknowledged that there can be a narrative disconnect between the past and present, and that this narrative disconnect between past and present can bring about a sense of lacking authenticity. Underpinning these accounts is the assumption that living authentically is synonymous with doing adulthood “successfully” after adversities in childhood. For example, Sonia explained that as a teenager she wanted everyone to think she was “from a normal family” but now she no longer wanted to live with a “mask” on.

I’m more honest as an adult and [pause] yeah, I just feel like if I carry on living like this, it’s almost like you know, you’re living with a mask on I suppose. But it just caused me so much stress. So now I’d just really rather be open and honest. Not about what happened in detail, it’s only really my partner that knows about that side, but I try and kind of say to people “oh I didn’t really have a good relationship with my parents”. So I’m more open to saying things like that now, so the more I’ve said it, I often receive the same reaction, which is shock. Erm, and I don’t know if that’s because people think, oh you know, she’s got a professional job or I don’t know (Sonia)

Becoming an adult meant that Sonia was in part, no longer concerned about being “normal” and “fitting in” (something that is linked to childhood). Adulthood was an opportunity to re-story the self as “successful”, and it was an opportunity to live in a way that is open and that causes her

“less stress”. Yet “that side” of her childhood is still hard to talk about because of the “shock” she receives in response. It becomes challenging to uphold authenticity while occupying a professional identity, meaning stories of struggle from childhood are less speakable. The part of herself that did not want to keep “living with a mask on”, was restricted by social and institutional narrative resources that imply that particularly for women, being successful professionally does not allow space for personal struggle (Chowdhury et al., 2019). Through her transitions story, Sonia has navigated her transition to young womanhood and “success”, but the cost of doing self-driven “success” work is high.

Hayley’s account was also one of bridging the old with the new in a quest to live authentically.

I talk about my experiences a lot ... I went through a period of just being quiet – like, just don’t say it cos people will judge you, whereas now I keep people in my life that would let me say it and wouldn’t judge me – they might still occasionally be shocked and fall off their chair or cry, which is always really awkward – like you know it’s sad, like my therapist brain knows it is sad but like my emotional response isn’t necessarily appropriate. Erm and I keep those people in my life now – that are willing to hear it. Which means it’s almost become quite normal for me to talk about it. It doesn’t particularly bother me to talk about it. (Hayley)

Hayley’s account was shaped by similar narrative resources, but she told a different story to Sonia. Hayley pointed to a time when she did not speak about her experiences because of the judgement of others. She pointed out, “I went through a period of being quiet – like, just don’t say it cos people will judge you, whereas now I keep people in my life that would let me say it and wouldn’t judge me”. The capacity for openness and authenticity was storied as a process; something that Hayley had taken action to achieve, and something that she has worked hard at. She reflected, “I keep those people in my life now – that are willing to hear it”. From this view, the transition to openness and authenticity was storied as work, and it is storied as something that is desirable. Statements such as “I talk about my experiences a lot ... ” and “it’s quite normal for me to talk about it. It doesn’t particularly bother me to talk about it” writes the self into a position of openness and authenticity, positioning the self as having done self-development work successfully and having bridged the old with the current in order to no longer be constrained by the past. A “successful” transitions story of self-development and authenticity can be a useful story to tell as it can support the production of a coherent self with a consistent and clear narrative of transition through which the past is narratively connected to the present.

Discussion

In the above analysis, I used Zittoun’s (2007) theorisation of transitions to understand the transition to adulthood as not only age-based, but dependent on social and relational contexts and processes which shape how stories of “becoming” an adult were told. In this discussion, I explore the narrative resources that I saw as shaping participants’ accounts. In doing so, I situate the voiced accounts in social, relational and cultural contexts, and I examine the potential ways that understanding voice(s) as situated, supports the capacity for listeners to stay with nuance, ambiguity and tension in people’s accounts.

It might be assumed that once a person reaches adulthood, the domestic abuse in childhood is left in the past. However, for participants in this study, becoming an adult did not automatically mean being free from the power and control that perpetrators of domestic abuse use. For example, Clara’s “tie” to her dad was not just a physical tie that ended once she left home, once she *wanted* it to end, or once her parents separated, but it was a psychological and relational tie that was maintained by her dad’s strategies of control. Clara’s transition to independence in young adulthood is not only dependant on age but it is also governed by her father utilising her position in the family to maintain his control. Becoming an adult age was storied as a typical marker of reaching adulthood; it *should* indicate freedom, but her sense of empowerment was compromised due to the way that her father’s control was ongoing.

Adulthood autonomy and independence (see Burman, 2017) is a narrative resource that shaped participants’ storytelling. Turning sixteen, eighteen, leaving home, or becoming a parent, all have

social and cultural meanings, offering a “growing up” narrative resource that assumes reaching an adult age means a strengthened voice and capacity to act. This can be a useful narrative resource, supporting women to re-story the self as an active agent who can act in ways that are taken seriously by others. However, a fixed story of what adulthood looks like (e.g. independence and autonomy) does not make space for other stories, or relational contexts. These relational contexts are key, especially in domestic abuse contexts where power and control are central features of how perpetrators maintain abuse.

Whilst “growing up” stories offer a sense of empowerment and autonomy, these narrative resources of adult autonomy and independence do not always make space for alternative stories of anger or struggle. For example, Sochi storied her anger as building up until she turned 16, meaning she could express it in a legitimised way - “I just lost my shit ... I’d had enough”. However, for Nadine, her anger was dismissed and de-legitimised when she had expressed it to a mental health professional: *if I was angry she would just say “well you’re just being like your dad now aren’t you?”*. For Frances, her anger was storied as risky as it might disrupt the coherency and stability of her “successful” and resilient self. She did not feel able to go back to services to provide feedback about how they had let her down, because her anger was “too much”, she would not be able to “cooperate with them” and they would not take her “seriously”.

From this view, participants’ accounts contained ambiguities and tensions, offering insight into how they navigate the transition to young adulthood. Gender plays a central role here. For example, Frances was “too angry” to provide feedback to services, pointing to the gendered power relations at play. Anger as a typically masculine trait, particularly in a mental health service context where gendered assumptions and power relations operate (Chesler, 2005; Moulding, 2006), might risk de-stabilising a rational and “acceptable” account of recovery in young adulthood. A stable recovery is useful as it allowed her to take up a position of strength and empowerment, but her story is regulated by gendered ideologies that make anger risky to express. For women who have multiple stories to tell, including stories explored in this article, such as doubt about parenting capabilities, and anger about how they have been treated, there are limited narrative resources to draw on that offer a way of telling stories that can account for both stability *and* struggle, or resilience *and* anger. This means some people can fall to a place of shame or self-accountability.

Self-accountability can offer a sense of empowerment and opportunity, but these stories also exist in a socio-cultural context that is built on neoliberal and patriarchal values, in which women who succeed are responsible for their own success, and those who don’t, are responsible for their failures too (McRobbie, 2004). This can be seen through Liv’s account, as her hope that the future can be different is not entirely unspeakable or silenced, but it is consistently knocked back through the existence of an individualising narrative framework that positions women themselves as responsible for their own self-making and self-healing after trauma. This kind of self-responsibility suggests that in the absence of what might be read as “successful” healing and recovery stories, women who have experienced childhood trauma and abuse can fall back to a story of self-blame by claiming responsibility for their difficulties and by storying their adult difficulties as a direct consequence of their childhood trauma (Woodiwiss, 2014).

Intersecting narrative resources of adulthood, femininity and “success” were helpful, in enabling women to construct a self that has the capacity to change and grow, enabling the production of a self that is stable and an account of the self that is culturally valuable. However, these same narrative resources can be limiting if experiences do not align with these success stories. For Sonia and Nadine, their mothering capabilities or capabilities to be “successful” in adulthood, were storied as dependent on their childhood blueprints, but these stories also consisted of uncertainties, disruption, struggle and shame which became less speakable. Participants employed strategies such as wearing a “mask” or pretending that they know how to parent by “faking it”. This becomes challenging when authenticity was storied as a desirable and central feature of living a “successful” adult life where a “mask” is no longer needed. Bridging old stories with current ones was an important feature

of telling a coherent story that positioned the self as having done the transition to adulthood “successfully”.

Conclusions and considerations for counselling and psychotherapy

This article draws on Hermans (2001) dialogical theory and Zittoun’s (2007) socio-cultural conceptualisation of transitions to argue that transitions to young adulthood after parental domestic abuse in childhood are non-linear, dynamic and shaped by several factors. Women’s accounts were shaped by their individual biographies and relationships, as well as socio-cultural structures and ideologies that shape dominant assumptions about what growing up after domestic abuse in childhood means, and what “successful” adult femininity looks like. Implications for counselling and psychotherapy practice should be considered tentative as more research is needed. Furthermore, the present study gained insight into the experiences of young adult women, but did not ask women about counselling or psychotherapy as a main research question. Considerations for practice are based on an additional question I considered after analysing data, and when considering these findings in relation to the broader domestic abuse counselling literature. Due to the substantial lack of existing literature about counselling and psychotherapy for this specific client group, as well as a lack of specific guidelines for therapists who work with emerging adults through the transition to adulthood, potential considerations for practice are needed.

Psychotherapeutic applications of storytelling are well documented such as in narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990). This article highlights that storytelling could be a powerful therapeutic tool for women by re-writing and re-imagining their stories and selves after childhood domestic abuse. Re-imagining and re-storying the self can enable people to challenge and resist dominant narratives about “people like them”, re-negotiating power in important ways. This is particularly important in domestic abuse-focused work given that domestic abuse is maintained through power and control. Levell (2019) conducted interviews with men about their childhood experiences of domestic abuse and found that life story-telling was a powerful way of enabling men to talk about their childhoods. Specifically, she used music elicitation and found this was a creative and meaningful way of enabling men to tell their stories and maintain a sense of control over the content and pace of the interviews.

To engage with power in therapy, therapists might also consider how they attend to ambiguities and tensions in clients’ stories. This includes listening to what is said, as well as what is *not* said. Roddy and Gabriel (2019) highlight the need for counsellors to have knowledge and understanding about domestic violence and to draw on this knowledge when working with clients, by working with what is said as well as “what the client has *not* said” (p. 675) and being able to “guess [the client’s] unfinished story” (p. 675) using their knowledge of domestic violence and the client. The present study suggests there is potential for re-imagining and re-storying the self when tensions and contradictions are attended to and explored actively through dialogue. With adequate training on domestic abuse, and with knowledge about how power and control underpins domestic abuse, therapists could actively reflect on and bring into awareness these tensions when they become apparent in the client’s narrative, including attending to what is not spoken, and the voices that are less dominant in clients’ stories as they tell them.

Attending to power in domestic abuse work is important (Herman, 2015; Howard & Arbaugh, 2019). It has already been argued in existing literature that practitioners need to take diverse experiences into account by adopting an intersectional, survivor-led, power-sharing, trauma-informed approach (Kulkarni, 2019). This article presents an analysis which focuses on both individual experience and the socio-structural contexts that shape those experiences. Consequently, I consider that therapists could attend to the way that socio-political and cultural contexts and power shapes the client’s meaning-making, their sense of self, their experiences of domestic abuse, and the narratives they bring to therapy. To enable this sensitivity to power in therapy, therapists could work reflexively, examining their own positionality within the therapeutic relationship and context. Therapists could adopt self-reflective practices to examine how power is shaping the therapy and therapy relationship

itself, and any biases, attitudes, and assumptions the therapist may hold which shape what they are willing to hear, and which parts of clients' stories they may not be listening for or may not hear. This might support therapists to tune into what is said, as well as what is not said, and support clients to explore tensions and contradictory feelings in the therapy context, without pathologising contradictory feelings or only attending to one aspect of experience or only one storyline. Engaging with nuance, complexity and multiplicity is an important commitment in supporting clients to tell their stories, and in hearing what they have to say.

Limitations and future research

This research explored young adult women's stories of transitions from childhood to adulthood after parental domestic abuse in childhood. It did not primarily explore their experiences of seeking or engaging in therapy, but findings do offer some insights that speak to how therapists might work with this group of clients. Offering considerations for counselling and psychotherapy was considered important given the lack of existing research that addresses working therapeutically with this group of clients during/through the child to young adulthood transition. This research is therefore limited, and future research should seek to explore young adults' experiences of therapy and their needs in therapy.

The sample was not sufficiently diverse, and future research should seek the views and experiences of a diverse range of young adults, including a representative sampling of diverse ethnicities and genders. Domestic abuse researchers should centre lived experiences to explore intersections of power, and how they operate in young adults' storytelling and meaning making after domestic abuse in childhood.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr *Tanya Frances* is currently employed as a Lecturer in Psychology and Counselling at The Open University. She is also a counsellor and psychotherapist in private practice, with an interest in working with people who have experienced domestic abuse, gender-based violence and other forms of trauma.

Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are not publicly available. Further information regarding the study is available on request from the corresponding author, TB. The data are not publicly available because raw transcripts contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. Due to the nature of this research, participants did not provide consent for their data to be shared publicly.

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