

The magic in the (extra)ordinary: Intensive validation to recalibrate the life-worlds of adolescents exposed to abuse

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aimed to explore environmental circumstances and interactional processes that appeared to be relevant for the dynamics of resilience in adolescents exposed to child abuse. Fieldwork at a learning and coping centre for children and their families was combined with semi-structured interviews with adolescent participants aged 12 to 18 years. A critical realist approach was used to unpack what has been called the ‘ordinary magic’ of resilience. We found that *intensively validating qualities* of both the *environment* and *relationships* seemed to be driving components for resilience. Borrowing ideas from the sociometer theory, we propose that particularly the consistent intensiveness may offer a *recalibration* of the adolescents' immediate life-worlds, in terms of how they perceive the people they meet and the environments they step into. In keeping with the transactional-ecological model of resilience, we suggest that such a recalibration leads to altered social agency that becomes visible through their immediate social participation.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, child abuse, critical realism, interpersonal environment, qualitative case study, resilience

1 | INTRODUCTION

Resilience is generally characterized by positive developmental outcomes despite a serious threat to development or adaptation (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). The study of resilience has given us a better understanding of the mechanisms by which children cope with adversity. Masten (2001) has shown that resilience, at least in children and youth, does not arise from special qualities among a few particularly remarkable children, but rather that the phenomenon stems from what Masten (2001) calls ‘ordinary magic’. Referring to the ordinariness of resilience, she concludes that it is made up of *unextraordinary processes* that are mobilized in children's minds, brains and bodies, as well as in their families, relationships and communities. However, Masten also points out that these most

basic of human adaptational systems are not invulnerable and require nurturing.

Rutter's (1987) ground-breaking work helped shift our understanding of resilience as a result of *individual traits* (Garmezy, 1985), which predict coping under stress, to *processes* that include reducing risk exposure, enhancing self-esteem, preventing the negative impact of risk factors on development trajectories and opening new development opportunities by shaping the child's environment. This resistance to the effects of risk exposure, also termed resilience, reflects *less* of the individual's capacity to overcome life challenges and *more* of the capacity of their informal and formal social networks to facilitate positive development under stress (Ungar, 2011).

Authoritative international researchers have favoured a *transactional-ecological* explanation for resilience (Felner, 2006; Lerner, 2006;

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Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2006; Ungar, 2011; Wright & Masten, 2006). Transactional-ecological conceptualisations interpret resilience as a *reciprocal process* embedded in a given ecology of interacting and dynamic systems that rely on culturally appropriate interactions between individuals and their social ecologies (Ungar, 2011). Ungar's (2011) research showed how the social ecology is decisive for constraining or liberating people's coping strategy options, resulting in either prosocial or less desirable behaviour, while still considering that personal motivation to adapt is an important factor in positive development after exposure to traumatic events (Ungar, 2013). Although this transactional-ecological interpretation is recognized as central within resilience theory, the aspects that give impetus to this interactive process are less well articulated. Understanding the *driving components* of resilience may assist in reconsidering the ways in which services can support improved psychosocial outcomes (Liebenberg, 2020). This present study attempts to articulate such driving forces in the dynamics of resilience.

The study of child abuse shows it to be a major public health problem, with extensive research addressing its prevalence, and effects (Ford & Courtois, 2009; Stensland, 2015; van der van der Kolk, 2000; Øverlien, 2012) leading to emotional, cognitive, social and physical problems (Ford & Courtois, 2009; Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Onyskiw, 2003; Stensland, 2015). Included in this is a negative self-concept further exacerbated by child abuse, resulting in feelings of insufficiency and guilt, not being worthy of love and the perception of being a bad child (Ju & Lee, 2010). Schoon (2012) points out that most studies of these at-risk children attempt to understand *adjustment problems* as reflected in academic failure, behavioural problems, motivational deficits and/or mental ill-health (deficit model), and calls for research directed at the strengths and resources of children exposed to abuse that also take into account the larger social system in which his/her development takes place.

There is, however, a growing body of research showing how resilience supportive processes are effective and applicable across various contexts and populations. Afifi and MacMillan (2011), for example, show how a stable family and social environment appear to be consistently linked with resilience, whereas Barrett et al. (2014) demonstrate how FRIENDS, a World Health Organization-supported programme (Barrett, 2012a; Barrett, 2012b), aims to prevent anxiety and depression in adolescents, enhancing resilience through providing a social framework for developing social and emotional skills. Kumsta et al. (2015), on the other hand, describe how a radical environmental change from a profoundly depriving institutional environment to an adoptive family can radically alter the expected development of deprived children. The common thread among these initiatives is *helping* adolescents harness the 'ordinary magic' (Masten, 2001) of the adaptational systems of resilience natural to man, allowing them to cope with the significant resistance in their lives. At the same time, all of the above studies, except Kumsta et al. (2015), provide the initiatives based on a specific symptomatology, not aetiology.

When it comes to the availability of services offered for children who have experienced abuse, treatment options have tended to draw on approaches for treating problems on the mapping of their

symptomatology and diagnosing, rather than taking their history of adversity and trauma into consideration. The focus is often 'What is wrong with you?' rather than 'What happened to you?' (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Indeed, the Norwegian National Action Plan on Domestic Violence (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2014–2017) calls for an increased understanding and development of specialized interventions for children and adolescents who have been exposed to child abuse.

Over the last two decades, however, we have seen a shift from treatment aimed at ameliorating post-traumatic symptoms (Fallot & Harris, 2005) to the development of trauma-informed services (Harris & Fallot, 2001) that direct attention to the aetiology of behaviour and the relational aspects of care. A trauma-informed approach in general entails that service providers have an integrated understanding of trauma in all aspects of their practice, where safety, connections, and managing emotions are the three pillars of trauma-informed care more specifically (Bath, 2008).

This study aims to add to the body of literature accounting for the resilience of youth after the experience of child abuse. The extant resilience literature is largely informed by quantitative studies that rely on measures reflecting adult understandings of resilience, and thereby not always appreciative enough of adolescent insights (Liebenberg & Theron, 2015; Wright et al., 2013).

Herein, we present a qualitative case study of a learning and coping centre, specifically designed to offer a trauma-informed service to children and adolescents who have been exposed to child abuse (e.g. physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, physical and/or emotional neglect, and/or exposure to intimate partner violence), and their secure parent/caregiver(s). Consistent with a transactional-ecological approach, this study explores central environmental and relational circumstances that appear to affect the dynamics of resilience in adolescent participants.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Research design

An investigation of both environmental and interpersonal factors requires a methodological approach that can embrace this complexity. The case study approach combines fieldwork and interviews, thereby generating data sensitive to both these factors, where critical realism (Danermark et al., 2002) offers a methodological tool to explore the intricate reality of these processes.

2.2 | Study setting

This case study took place at the Stine Sofie Centre, a learning and coping centre for children and adolescents exposed to child abuse, funded by the Norwegian government (Stine Sofie Stiftelse, 2018). The centre provided a unique opportunity to explore aspects relevant for the dynamics of resilience, through both observation of the social

interaction within the programme and interviews with adolescent participants.

The main aim of the centre is to foster resilience of the child, adolescent, and their families through meaningful experiences in a secure and supportive environment. Experiences of abuse (i.e., aetiology) confirmed by a primary physician, child protection services or other healthcare workers qualify them for participation at this centre, rather than specific symptomatology (Schønning et al., 2021). Located in serene surroundings with separate apartments for each family, outdoor playgrounds, together with a main building containing a library, playrooms, sports halls, meeting rooms and a dining room, the centre creates a village-like feeling. The programme at the centre runs over a period of five consecutive days and consists of a variety of formal and informal, individual and group activities allowing for coping-focussed, positive experiences with others who have had similar experiences. The focus is on resources, strengths and coping strategies, as they are developed through interaction, rather than attending to symptoms and symptom relief.

2.3 | Participants

The participant observation took place during two 5-day programmes at the centre where a total of 11 adolescents (7 girls and 4 boys) aged 12–18 years, 19 parents and 18 staff were present at the centre. The *primary informants* during the fieldwork were the *adolescents*, viewed in interaction with their ecology (both environmental and relational) that included parents and staff. The interview part of the study recruited adolescents in the same age interval from four additional 5-day programmes. The final sample of interview informants included a total of 16 adolescents (13 girls and 3 boys).

2.4 | Data collection

The participant observation was used to investigate contextual and relational interactions of the adolescents (primary informants) at the centre to explore the complex characteristics of social reality (Smith & Elger, 2014) and combined with semi-structured interviews that were used to obtain adolescents' descriptions and viewpoints.

2.4.1 | Participant observation

The first author conducted fieldwork throughout two complete 5-day programmes (approximately 112 hours) at the centre. The 'observer as participant' stance (Kawulich, 2005) allowed the first author to participate openly in group activities, while minimizing disturbance of, and influence on, ongoing processes. Activities observed and participated in included staff-only meetings and programme content including discussion groups, games/activities and meals. This allowed the first author to experience the centre while establishing rapport with the participants in an informal manner in her endeavour to obtain a more insider (emic) perspective (Malinowski, 1922).

Informal interviews with adolescents, parents and staff took place during free times and meals to gain in situ information and viewpoints. As the adolescents were the primary focus of the study, data obtained from other participants during fieldwork was used primarily to increase the first author's emic stance. A general eagerness from all participants at the centre to participate in this study and share opinions and experiences at the centre was sensed. This was noted as a general observation in the field notes, warranting further investigation during the data analysis stage. Informal interviews were not audio-recorded: instead, notes were made shortly after each conversation.

Descriptive field notes and the first author's personal reflections were noted each night. This reflexive process helped identify some of the first author's immediate personal perspectives (Maxwell, 2005) and adjust her focus for the following day (Davies, 2008). An example of such a reflection was the initial sense of 'ordinariness' when first arriving at the centre, which did not correspond with the enthusiasm that was observed and expressed among the participants. This revealed the first author's initial 'outsider' (etic) focus and challenged her to obtain more of an 'insider' (emic) focus (Morris et al., 1999), as well as fuelling the search for the answer to the pending question: 'What is *really* going on here?'

2.4.2 | Interviews

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet location toward the end of adolescents' stay at the centre, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some examples of questions from the interview guide are (a) 'Tell me a little how you have experienced this week; (b) Describe an incident/activity that really made an impression on you; (c) What do you think could be done to improve this centre?; and (d) Can you comment on the different teaching sessions that you had here, what are your thoughts on them, was it new information that you received, or had you heard it before?'

2.5 | The critical realist approach

Critical Realist (CR) ideas and principles by Sayer (1992, 2000) and Danermark et al. (2019) have been applied in this case study. CR is particularly interested in the interplay between human agency and social structures, which operate on many levels (Archer, 1998).

To comprehend and explain social realities and phenomena, a CR approach is concerned with mechanisms operating within social contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Mechanisms refer to various forms of powers that may generate effects that are sometimes observable. Because mechanisms do not *always* bring about effects, we look for *tendencies* that cause certain things to happen in certain circumstances (Fleetwood, 2001), whether this entails an enabling or constraining effect, either on an intrapersonal, interpersonal, or societal level (Houston, 2010).

The participants' own accounts are thus the *starting point*, not the end, of the research process as fieldwork combined with

semi-structured interviews aims not only to describe events but also to *explain* them, by identifying the influence of social structures on human agency (Archer, 1998). Human action is conceived as both enabled and constrained by social structures, and this action in turn reproduces or transforms those structures (Leca & Naccache, 2006) recognizing the ability of humans to not be exclusively determined by these structures. Under certain circumstances, individuals may be enabled to transform social structures by responding proactively to the situations in which they find themselves (Connelly, 2000). In this study, more specifically, we are concerned with relational and environmental structures and interactions found at the learning and coping centre, and how these aspects tend to affect the dynamics of resilience in adolescent participants who have been exposed to child abuse.

2.6 | Data analysis

Danermark et al. (2002) first four stages of the CR approach were used to analyse the data herein: *Initial description of tendencies*, *analytical resolution* (i.e. identification of key components), *abduction* (i.e. theory redescription) and *retroduction* (i.e. identification of possible mechanisms).

This is an iterative process whereby previously completed stages may be revisited and the process repeated.

Stage 1: *Initial description of tendencies* – ‘What is happening?’ The first stage entailed immersion in field notes and interview transcripts, where preliminary descriptions of potential resilience-nurturing processes (also called ‘meaningful processes’), leads to identifying events or observation clusters (Sayer, 1992). Herein, an observation cluster example is when the participants expressed the shift from feeling invisible to feeling seen within the programme context.

Stage 2: *Analytical resolution* (i.e. identification of key components) – ‘Why is this happening?’ Next, an attempt is made to understand how events or processes come about. Mind maps are used, with participants’ statements linked to in-context observations toward arriving at a ‘best guess’ as to why resilience-nurturing processes seemed to occur. This exploration also entails an attempt to identify both enabling and

constraining factors in the interplay between structure and agency. Herein, we searched for ways in which environmental and relational circumstances appeared to enable or hinder adolescents’ sense of validation.

Stage 3: *Abduction* (i.e. theory redescription) – ‘How could the explanations be different?’ In the third phase, tentative statements are redescriptioned, refined or recontextualized by exploring and subjecting them to different theoretical perspectives and explanations. Intensive rereading of resilience publications and relevant literature in allied fields is used to consider relevant theories. Examples of theories that were assessed include *Resilience as Transactional Equilibrium* (Johnson, 1999), *Systemic Resilience* (Ungar, 2018) and *Social-Ecological Interpretation of Resilience* (Ungar et al., 2013). This stage enabled a greater theoretical sensitivity and in-depth enquiries into the processes under study, where we became particularly aware of the required degree of intensiveness involved in the validating aspects of the environmental and relational transactions at the centre.

Stage 4: *Retroduction* (i.e. identification of possible mechanisms) – ‘What basic qualities must exist for these processes to happen?’ In the fourth stage, the task is to advance from the level of empirical observations to arrive at possible conceptualisations for why something is what it is, and not something else. In other words: Why did our participants experience the programme as they did, compared with previous related experiences? This analytical stage is often dialectical, where one phenomenon is examined in relation to its opposite. For example, we suggest that the concepts of *recalibration* and *objective versus subjective perceptions of relational value* found in the Sociometer theory (Leary & Downs, 1995) could offer a possible interpretation for what was observed: The significance of the intensive validation resulting in the so-called magic, amidst what can appear as ordinary at first glance, to be experienced as extraordinary by the participants in this study.

These steps resulted in tentative propositions of possible *driving forces* of resilience-nurturing processes, which are presented in section 3 (see Figure 1) and further addressed in section 4.

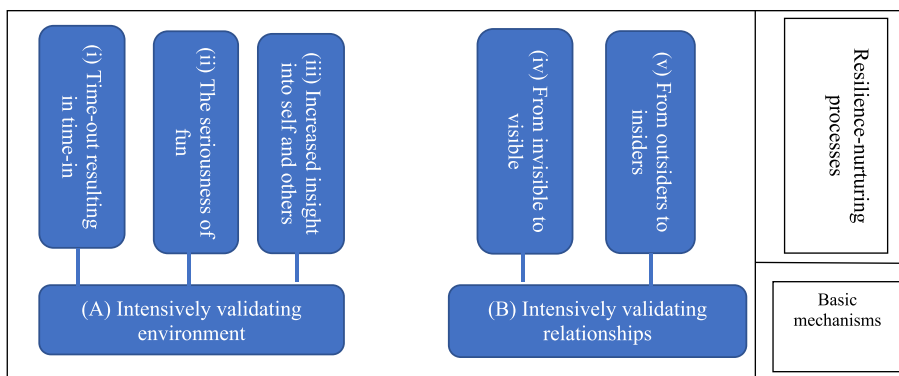


FIGURE 1 Schematic overview of findings

2.7 | Ethics

The study was approved by the Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (project 2019/284) and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD Ref. no. 662438). The participants between ages 12 and 18 provided their independent consent (i.e. without parental consent) (Lov om medisinsk og helsefaglig forskning (Helseforskningsloven) (Health Research Law), 2017). Special consideration was taken to ensure that consent was informed, which the information given prior to participation was understandable, relevant, age appropriate and as coherent as possible to each individual. This was especially important in this study due to the participants' young age and their vulnerable situation as victims of abuse. A study follow-up plan was developed, in the event that a participant would be in need of professional support after participating (NESH, 2016). It was considered important to include adolescent participants in order to obtain a first-person perspective representing children's experiences, perceptions and understandings in their life-world, and not merely 'child perspectives' representing an adult's understanding of a child's perceptions, experiences and actions in the world (Sommer et al., 2010).

3 | FINDINGS

This case study explored environmental and interpersonal factors that appear to nurture the development of resilience in adolescents (aged 12–18 years) who had been exposed to child abuse. This resulted in the identification of five processes that is proposed to have been enabled by two basic mechanisms. One mechanism is structural or environmental in nature, while the other has relational, interpersonal, and interactional qualities and is thus compatible with a transactional-ecological understanding and the aforementioned interplay between structure and agency. Instances in which this interplay became clear in the descriptions of the processes are highlighted below.

A schematic overview illustrates the five resilience-nurturing processes and the two basic mechanisms (Figure 1).

This schematic artificially represents the processes and mechanisms as separate categories. In reality, an intimate web of associations, processes and transactions exists, where in many instances these processes may overlap.

Below, each of the processes and how they appear to relate to their proposed mechanism is described. However, first we introduce the concept of *intensiveness*, which we suggest may relate to the qualities of each of these processes and their mechanisms. Pseudonyms are used to increase clarity when participants are quoted.

3.1 | Intensiveness

Within the identified processes, across both observations and interviews, an *intensiveness* was detected. This *intensiveness* appeared to be experienced by the participants as both a focus and a

thoroughness, which seemed to be interwoven throughout all aspects of the programme and the resource centre itself. This appeared to be present from the very first encounter, where examples of interview excerpts include (italics added by the authors): '*... the first meeting really did a lot*' (Michelle, 18); '*... I liked the atmosphere here ... from the very first day ...*' (Jim, 17); '*When my family contact (staff member) joked with me ... right at the very first meeting ... then I just knew, I just knew that everything was going to be okay ...*' (Anna, 16, smiling shyly).

An equivalent *intensiveness* was reiterated in the relational aspects of the programme (italics added also here): '*... that everybody always had time ...*' (Jim, 17); '*Everybody sees you ... and that's not normal really, when there is a lot going on, and people are busy with their own stuff ...*' (Laura, 15); and '*... always get a smile ...*' (Anna, 16).

The adolescent participants describe seemingly ordinary encounters; however, the *intensiveness* seems to allow for a 'magical' effect, referring to Masten's (2001) understanding of resilience as 'ordinary magic'.

In short, we propose that *intensive validation* inherent in both the environment and interpersonal relationships constitutes basic conditions or qualities – also referred to as mechanisms – that seemed to enable resilience-nurturing processes to unfold. We shall now go through these processes and proposed basic mechanisms (as illustrated in Figure 1).

A. Intensively validating environment

The first three processes, (i) *Time-out resulting in 'Time-In'*, (ii) *The seriousness of fun* and (iii) *Increased insight into self and others*, are described in relation to the first of the basic mechanisms: (1) *Intensively validating environment*. These three processes seemed to relate most importantly to the environmental or structural nature of the programme and thus the mechanism of an intensively validating environment. We consider these three processes with examples from the empirical data.

- i. *Time-out resulting in 'Time-in'*. Several participants spoke of a 'time-out' or vacation-like feeling at the centre, where some even used the word '*holiday*' to describe their experience. 'It was just good to kind of ... get some time off ... get away from the daily grind ...' (Michelle, 18).

The participants arrive at the centre with great anticipation, not quite knowing what to expect, despite receiving detailed information and photographs prior to their stay. Many arrived tired after a long journey including flights, trains, buses and taxis. Upon arrival, the participants expressed how the scenic location and amenities at the centre itself were especially beautiful and welcoming, showing what seemed to indicate a surprising amount of attention to care and detail. This unexpectedness of the centre appeared to have an immediate and possibly catalytic effect on the participants, resulting in some emotionally charged answers when asked how they experienced being at the centre:

What is the one thing you would highlight from your stay here? (Researcher)

The atmosphere here ... yes, definitely the atmosphere. ... On a scale of 1 to 10, I give it an 11! (Jim, 17)

The environment as a whole, emerged as having a validating effect on its participants, reflected by the relaxed, casual manner in which participants' initially apprehensive smiles and somewhat tense handshakes were replaced by a more expectant atmosphere.

Time-out can be understood as getting away from the usual routine in one's daily life, whereas time-in may refer to the choice to commit to the participants' situation without escaping, for instance to a virtual, digital world:

Nobody used their phones ... we spoke about it before we left because we are kinda, yeah, ... like dependent on them (our phones) ... and we were wondering how it would be ... but even when we were allowed to use our phones ... like just before bed ... we just ... did not. ... It was like we did not need them ... (Michelle, 18)

This time-out from the outside world and time-in to engage in the programme, without the need to 'escape', apparently allowed for opportunities in which the participants could open up and talk about things that they might otherwise have preferred to avoid.

This week has really helped me a lot ... I mean, ... I did not have to talk to my "family contact" (staff contact at the centre) specifically or anything ... but I could like, ... like talk to anyone (any of the staff) at the centre ... like to the first person you see ... and they always have a good answer ... so it has been especially good for me to ... to open up a little ... and this ... takes time ... like, just because you have a couple of hours with a psychologist ... then there is like no guarantee that you are ready to open up ... 'cos that kinda thing takes time ... (Mary, 17)

As such, time-out from the many things that fill life allowed the participants the opportunity to have 'time-in' regarding some of life's difficulties. We propose that this process of time-out from everyday settings leading to time-in within the centre environment was enabled by an intensively validating environment and further constituted a potential driving component for positive development of resilience.

ii. *The seriousness of fun.* Several participants expressed their surprise at the amount of time spent on 'fun' things as opposed to 'serious' things during their stay. They went on to explain how much they had learned from participating in these activities, reiterating the importance of the organized activities, such as a visit to the zoo, a rainy afternoon at the beach, and creating films using the green screen technique. The participants also

mentioned spontaneous activities such as playing volleyball, cards and games, or just sitting and chatting with other participants.

The emotional responses to participating in the variety of activities were exemplified in this way:

It's just a positive place, this is the only week that I have been so active ... like, like in a very long time ... Everything was just ... really, really good, like ... like much better than what my life usually looks like. ... And that makes you positive ... you just become more positive from being here. (Laura, 15)

Within this process, an interplay between structure and human agency became apparent. Affective and social experiences appeared to have been enabled by the centre's framework and activities. The place and variety of activities (i.e. structures) gave the participants the chance to choose to engage in (i.e. agency), in interaction with others.

There was so much to do. We could go wall climbing in the evening ... and even if we were afraid, the family contacts were there ... they just believed in us ... no matter what ... and that was such, such ... a good feeling ... and then I dared to do it (wall climbing) ... (Mary, 17)

Activities like wall climbing, described above, created opportunities for the participants to be challenged and to challenge themselves, allowing for situations in which they could experience mastery. Wetsuits were available for those who wanted to swim, once again enabling experiences of outdoor enjoyment. 'And whatever we asked ... the answer was just "Yes"! We could even swim ... in that freezing water ... and one of the adults even swam with us!' [said in an enthusiastic tone] (Anna, 16).

The staff's enthusiasm for participating with the children and adolescents in team games seemed to encourage a *high level of both participation and positivity*. The centre staff clearly contributed to the supportive environment and atmosphere of being allowed to have fun amid the seriousness that had brought them all together.

It seemed that having 'enough' fun was essential, and it was in these situations that the adolescents experienced positive emotions that seemed to surprise them. These emotions then appeared to motivate or enable them to further interact with other participants and staff, choosing to actively participate in ways that were observed during fieldwork. We suggest the phrase 'The seriousness of fun' highlights how play and engaging in fun activities contained important components of intensiveness. The positive emotions generated could be understood as a result of the intensive validation available in the centre environment.

iii. *Increased insight into self and others.* Dividing attending families into groups according to age allowed the psychoeducational part of the programme to be conducted at levels that were adapted to

each group. This section of the programme included short films and activities that helped the participants, in this case specifically *the adolescents*, identify with a character in the film snippet in a nonconfrontational manner. These sessions were the only time during the programme when the reason for the participants' stay at the centre was addressed. The impact trauma may have on an individual participant was described using these films and follow-up activities. In this way, an attempt was made to increase the individual adolescent's insight into why they experience the emotions that they do, and why these reactions may differ from others who have not been exposed to traumatic experiences.

Fun activities were also included in this psychoeducational block. One participant described it like this: '... and ... the activity about "personal space", it was a game, but we all knew that we were working with our stories ... without ... well, working with them ... kinda ... directly ...' (Michelle, 18).

Several participants mentioned that they had participated in similar teaching sessions before. However, for some of the adolescents, this was the first time that they really understood what was being conveyed, which led to acquiring not only personal insight but also increased understanding of others, exemplified in these two excerpts:

'I had heard this before from my psychologist. But this time, I dunno ... I just kinda ... kinda understood it.' (Tom, 15).

'I, I realise ... that others may have experienced things like I have, ... It's not only me ... there might be a reason ... a reason for why they are acting like they are ...' (Michelle, 18).

The makeup of the group may have reminded her that she was not alone in her experiences. In addition, increased motivation stimulated by other activities at the centre may have made the adolescents more receptive to the information this time around.

Throughout the programme, the participants were taught various exercises in playful settings also outside of the teaching sessions. For example, the participants were given some everyday activities like lifting their hands in a big circle over their heads and leaning slightly backwards to take a big, imaginary sip of coffee. The staff member explained that this exercise was a good method for gaining control of one's breathing when feeling overwhelmed. Toward the end of the week, stay a group of adolescent participants were standing together, where one participant said

So, when we are having a rough day, like ... we can just call each other, and say: "Let us have a big cup of coffee together." Giggling, they then all lifted their arms above their heads in the forms of large cups and took big, long, imaginary "sips" (excerpt from field notes).

This seemed to show insight into the fact that life can suddenly become overwhelming, both for themselves and others, and that there are ways that they can support each other through it. We propose that this intensive validation – via acknowledging their emotional needs and/or struggles both intrapersonally and interpersonally – may be additional driving components that are resilience supportive.

The three processes described above appear to have been enabled by what we refer to as an *intensively validating environment*. The centre environment has been ordered in such a way that the participants feel valued as soon as they arrive. The details in the decoration, the variety and quantity of activities, and the ratio of staff to participants are some of the environmental factors that surface as enabling the participants to experience the validation at the frequency and intensity that they describe. As such, the environment emerged as being directly involved in shaping the participants' experiences, by allowing for social and affective dimensions that were both observed and described by the interviewees.

iv. Intensively validating relationships

The second mechanism of our findings is concerned with the relational, interpersonal and interactional dimension. Herein, we address the remaining two resilience-nurturing processes: (iv) *From invisible to visible*, and (v) *From outsiders to insiders*, and how they operate within the second mechanism – *Intensively validating relationships*.

v. *From invisible to visible*. The degree of friendliness with which participants were met by centre staff was a theme in all interviews. This was perceived as transcending professional friendliness. The interviewees described feeling that they went from being 'just another participant', to being 'a specific participant'. They described this experience as being like shifting 'invisible' in a crowd to being 'visible'; to being known, expected, and even feeling liked. 'It felt like they really ... wanted us there ...' (Anna, 16); '... the first meeting really did a lot ... we were received so well ... you jus' kinda felt so ... so "seen" ...,' (Michelle, 18).

Experiencing this level of attention was something the participants kept coming back to and did not take for granted. One participant pointed out

Well, when you come here, you are ... you are ... people are happy, ... it's as if they are glad to see you ... and you are met with a smile, and that's kind of not how things are ... elsewhere. ... And you become, kinda positive? ... yea, positive from that. And when you come to breakfast it's like ... "Good morning", with a big smile ... this is not how things *usually* are.' (Laura, 15)

The transactional interplay between structure and agency is apparent in this quote. The interviewee described how the attention

she received from the centre staff affected her and contributed to a more positive attitude, which again seemed to affect her reactions at the centre in a manner different from how she otherwise might have reacted.

The participants described seemingly 'ordinary' things that made their stay at the centre exceeding many of their expectations. These events do not *appear* especially impressive, and yet they described them as if they were 'magic'. The fieldwork observations also gave evidence to intensive relational validation.

Behind the scenes, centre staff worked hard to facilitate the 'ordinary magic' of being seen, which the participants described in the interviews. During preparatory meetings on Tuesday mornings (day 2), photos of each family were passed around and centre staff memorized their names, ensuring they were all familiar with that week's participants. During the Wednesday morning preparatory meetings (day 3), centre staff did what they call the 'heart exercise', which entailed that all participant names (both adults and children) were written on a whiteboard. Each staff member then put a coloured magnet next to each name, indicating the kind of alliance they had managed to establish with each participant. This process was intended to ensure that each participant was receiving attention from at least one staff member, in addition to revealing which participants might need extra attention over the following days to ensure that each and every participant felt 'seen'. This structure appeared to support the resilience-nurturing process of moving *from invisible to visible* for the attending families and may function as an important component of the *Intensively Validating Relationships*.

vi. *From outsiders to insiders*. During the introductory meeting between each family and the staff member that had specific responsibility for them during their stay at the centre, each family member was given the opportunity to explain why they believed they were at the centre. While some participants openly shared what had happened in their family, others chose not to say much. The staff member then conveyed that all centre participants had direct or indirect experiences of abuse. The realization that the staff members knew about these experiences, while not focusing on them directly, appeared to have both a disarming and a relaxing effect on the participants. They expressed what could be understood as a sense of freedom from not having to explain or hide anything. Some participants mentioned how refreshing it was to be able to do 'ordinary things' and 'have fun' with others with similar experiences. It appeared to have a unifying effect on the participants, including the adolescents, who described normally having difficulties making friends, but who were now able to easily connect with the other participants. '... even though we spoke very little to the others (participants) about what we had experienced ... we just knew that, like ... that we were not alone ...' (Michelle, 18).

The participants described attempting to tell friends back home about their experiences of abuse, and how this in some instances had caused strong negative reactions among their classmates, peers

and peers' parents. They went on to explain how this led to feelings of being alone, being different and being an outsider. This stood in stark contrast to their stay at the centre, where the participants shifted from feeling like outsiders, different from everyone else, to becoming insiders where people around them really understood.

... just being here together with people who have experienced tough things ... I mean you just, you just understand, ... and you understand the reactions more than others would ... and you can have fun anyway, without thinking about what has happened ... (Laura, 15)

We suggest that these two processes, *from invisible to visible* and *from outsider to insider*, were enabled by the mechanism we identified as *intensively validating relationships* which, again, had the possibility to enable and nurture resilience.

Introductory meetings, learning participants' names and consistent initiative taken by the staff members throughout the stay effectively communicated a sense of significance and recognition, which we propose may be a driving force within the relational components of the dynamics of resilience.

4 | DISCUSSION

In this case study, we explored circumstances and processes in the environment and interpersonal interactions within a 5-day programme at a learning and coping centre, developed to support resilience in children and adolescents who have experienced abuse. Our initial result was a description of five potentially resilience-nurturing processes that included participants experience: a time-out that seemed to lead to a time-in; the seriousness of fun; development of increased insight into themselves and others; moving from a position of invisibility to one of visibility; and transitioning from feeling like an outsider to becoming an insider.

We further propose that an *intensively validating environment* and *intensively validating relationships* are the two basic mechanisms that enabled these processes to play out and as such are considered to be *driving components* for strengthening resilience. In other words, these mechanisms, and particularly their intensiveness, seem to be required for the participants to *perceive* the processes in ways that strengthen their resilience. In this discussion, we investigate *how* the intensive validation of the environment and relationships might function as driving forces in establishing the dynamics of resilience. More specifically, we will make use of ideas from the Sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), where perceived relational value is gauged through a type of measurement, called a *Sociometer*. Perception of relational value, gauged by the 'sociometer', may become 'miscalibrated' due to trauma (Bick et al., 2017; Pollak et al., 2000) and may therefore be in need of a 'recalibration'. Finally, we consider possible implications of these propositions for the wider field of resilience research and practice.

Although individual and ecological approaches are complementary, the ecological aspects are often de-emphasized while individual traits are rarely overlooked in psychological research, and hence duly emphasized (Ungar, 2012). However, social perception of this ecology, distorted by adversity and/or abuse, may be affected transactionally by the qualities of the social environment. Re-establishing a 'workable' perception may be a crucial condition for agency and may even begin with the 'outer' environment. At the centre, there seemed to be a clear *reciprocity*, central in the transactional-ecological understanding of resilience, between the adolescents as individuals and the environment in which they were actively participating. Our findings suggest that *both* the adolescents' physical and social environments were *driving forces*, and thereby seemed to potentiate their exercising personal agency, allowing themselves to engage, have fun and open up to the experience during their stay at the centre. This level of participation is somewhat unexpected when compared with child abuse research (Ford & Courtois, 2009; Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Onyskiw, 2003; Stensland, 2015) that would indicate an expected lower level of social engagement within this group. We thus ask the question: How and why is the process of resilience, or 'ordinary magic' (Masten, 2001), now seemingly activated among the participants?

We now take a step further suggesting a possible way to understand *how* the intensively validating environment and relationships operated to nurture resilience, by borrowing the metaphor of the 'sociometer' and the accompanying idea of 'recalibration' (of this sociometer) from the Sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995). Leary and Downs (1995) explain self-esteem by introducing the idea of a 'sociometer', where this may be thought of metaphorically as a gauge through which a person assesses their relational value within social encounters. The 'sociometer' continually reacts to indications of social acceptance or rejection, monitoring and responding to cues that reflect or signal the individual's relational value, that is, the degree to which others regard their relationship with the individual as valuable. A person's self-esteem may be conceptualized as the 'resting position' of the sociometer in the absence of incoming personal feedback. In turn, this resting position becomes decisive of how the individual senses and engages with their social environment (Leary & Downs, 1995).

Similarly, we suggest that adolescents who have experienced child abuse suffer from a 'miscalibration' *vis a vis* their social environment, which is also indicated in Pollak et al. (2000) and Bick et al.'s (2017) findings. An individual whose 'sociometer' indicates a low degree of relational value in its 'resting position' may feel they are on the lower side of the rejection-acceptance continuum (Leary & Downs, 1995). In other words, although they are *objectively* accepted (i.e. for an observer's point of view), they may nonetheless *subjectively* feel that they are in effect being rejected, thereby misinterpreting those expressing emotions around them and the feedback offered in these expressions. In this way, there may well be a miscalibration in the transaction between the individual and their ecology, which in turn may allow for misinterpretation of the amount of relational value actually available in their interpersonal environment.

The centre-based processes and conditions may have given these adolescents an intensively positive 'boost' that, in turn, led to what we suggest may be a 'recalibration' of how they related to the people and environment surrounding them. Most of the participants speak of the intensiveness of how *everybody* at the centre smiles at them and greets them. They speak of these experiences as if they have never experienced this type of validation before, as if it is something totally new to them. It is thus plausible to ask whether they merely *notice* being greeted or smiled at for the first time, and thus ask: What has happened, that has allowed the participants to notice this validation for the first time, something *ordinary* that they now experience as *extraordinary*?

More recent research shows that maltreated children demonstrate less accuracy in recognition of facial emotions, a skill critical for engaging with and interacting within a social environment (Bick et al., 2017). Bick et al. (2017) further demonstrate how maltreatment may therefore cause individuals to require more perceptual information in order to accurately identify happy facial emotions. They found that the most intense versions of happy faces were most accurately recognized, but that maltreated children showed significantly greater difficulty in distinguishing happy faces from neutral expressions, when compared to non-neglected children. Perhaps the intensiveness of validation we suggest was present at the centre, surmounted such a threshold and made it perceivable for the participants. We further suggest that this intensiveness may also have an effect on the individual participant's 'sociometer', allowing for a 'recalibration' of social perceptions. This 'recalibration' may also be beneficial beyond their stay at the centre.

If the ability to perceive and recognize other people's expressions is limited (and thereby 'miscalibrated'), so also are the conditions for agency are compromised. Resilience in the face of adversity includes maintaining (or re-establishing) the ability to perceive others with openness and act (agency) based on such perceptions.

The environment and relationships offered at the centre were not only unambiguously positive and consistent but notably *intensive*. This intensiveness – or kind of positive overload – may have made it possible for the adolescents to shift from a subjective sense of rejection, amid a context of being objectively valued, to more accurately perceiving and accepting the relational value on offer. This, in turn, may have contributed to a positive transaction between the individual participant and his/her ecology, thereby further enabling a renewed sense and expression of personal agency manifested in the social engagement and openness among the participants.

Importantly, this 'recalibration' is not only a matter of how the adolescents *think* about or measure themselves (i.e. the cognitive aspect), but it also affects how they act or engage with others and their environment (i.e. the interactional aspect). The intensive dose of relational and environmental validation provided seems not only to be recalibrating their thinking but perhaps even recalibrating the immediate *life-worlds* of these adolescents.

Social support, as a protective factor against detrimental effects after exposure to traumatic events, is a well-established empirical finding (e.g. Brewin et al., 2000; Neria et al., 2010). Our findings,

including our interpretation of them through the metaphors of sociometer and recalibration, may contribute to a more thorough understanding of *how* social support enhances and enables resilience in adolescents exposed to child abuse. The mechanisms identified herein, an *intensively validating environment* and *intensively validating relationships* may have led to an increased sense of control and security, positivity and hope, often termed 'protective factors' in resilience literature (Sippel et al., 2015).

We propose that the 'magic' behind the basic mechanisms of an *intensively validating environment* and *intensively validating relationships* is their *intensiveness*, where adolescents who have been exposed to abuse need to experience a greater intensiveness in environmental and relational validation so that a *recalibration of their life-worlds* can occur.

5 | STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The strengths of this study include the twofold data collection, through which we allowed *the child's perspective* to be heard. We also conducted fieldwork to obtain a richer dataset.

The study was not without limitations. First, the CR perspective implies that our knowledge of the world is incomplete, partial, and fallible, meaning that there is always room for revision (Maxwell, 2012). Although the interviewees participated voluntarily toward the end of the 5-day programme, it is plausible that only those who were positive about the programme agreed to be interviewed. However, the CR method attempts to describe the 'whole' story, focussing equally on stories of success and failure within the four analytical stages. Herein, no stories of failure were revealed, possibly suggesting that the 'whole' story was not obtained.

Finally, our findings are based on a case study of a specific programme, and the long-term effects of which were not assessed. A future longitudinal qualitative study may give greater insight into whether the possible recalibration of the participants' life-world extended beyond the limits of the 5-day programme. Also, research into other more traditional, intensive interventions for traumatized adolescents, where the adolescent voices are the focus of the study, would continue to build the body of literature exploring adolescents' first-person experiences of treatment interventions.

6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This case study offers further insights into the dynamics of the transactional-ecological understanding of resilience, more specifically by identifying some of the driving components for nurturing the process of resilience in adolescents who have experienced child abuse. We propose that the magic is found amidst an (extra)ordinary intensiveness available across environmental and relational validating structures. Importantly, these findings also show that the transactional process *begins* with *intensive* social support. Implications include the recommendation for interventions designed to foster resilience in

adolescents exposed to child abuse to incorporate intensively validating environments and facilitate intensively validating relationships as the cornerstones of their practice.

Our main finding was that intensively validating qualities within the environment and relationships seem necessary to achieve a positive recalibration of social perception among the adolescents exposed to abuse. Enabling the possibility of a *subjective* feeling of validation, which corresponds to the objective validation offered at the centre, seems to allow the adolescents to value and be affected by the intervention. In this way, the full potential of relational and environmental resources is realized, so that the magic of resilience may unfold.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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