

Social Cure and Social Curse: Social Identity Resources and Adjustment to Acquired Brain Injury

Prof. Orla Muldoon, University of Limerick (PI) | Dr. Stephen Walsh, University of Manchester | Mariah Curtin, ABI Ireland | Dr. Elaine Kinsella, University of Limerick | Dr. Lorraine Crawley, ABI Ireland



INTRODUCTION AND AIMS OF THE STUDY

There is increasing evidence that a person's identification with social groups can protect and enhance health, establishing a kind of 'social cure'. However, for those affected by a disabling condition such as acquired brain injury (ABI), their identity may also represent a burden, a form of 'social curse'. This study explored whether there are altered social identities and changes in associated social identity resources after ABI, and how these changes might contribute to rehabilitation and adjustment post injury.



METHOD

This study took a qualitative approach which allowed the research to attend to the positive and negative identity dynamics as well as to their subjective meaning to those affected.



PARTICIPANT PROFILE

In total, 15 people (10 male, 5 female) affected by ABI were interviewed, between the ages of 25-63 years old. All individuals had lived with an ABI for some time, ranging from 4 to 18 years, and with variability in the severity of their injuries.



INTERVIEW PROCESS

Participants were in the main recruited through a service provider, Acquired Brain Injury Ireland. Interviews were semi-structured, with an interview guide of open ended questions to explore the topics of interest.



DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

The analysis resulted in four themes emerging:



THEME 1: Changed social relationships

“As soon as the words ‘brain damage’ are mentioned, people run away.”



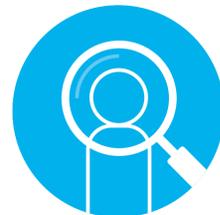
THEME 2: Family relationships as cure and curse

“They really did help bolster me up.”



THEME 3: Group activity, support and adjustment post injury

“We find we treat each other like as if we're at work.”



THEME 4: Changing views of self as a post injury social identity process

“It's like getting reset.”

KEY FINDINGS HIGHLIGHTED BY THE RESEARCH:

- The social identity change is central to the experience of brain injury.
- Participants reported changes in their group membership and social networks after injury.
- Identity loss and reduced social support were described as disabling (social curse).
- Engagement in meaningful group activity with others affected by ABI and access to affected peers enabled new group-based resources such as social support (social cure).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

On social identity

Our participants articulated social identity loss and associated changes in their social identity resources in their post injury lives. Consistent with emerging evidence from social identity research, participants also reported social identity continuity. Participants emphasised the family as an important resource. This fits in with social identity theorising which suggests that belonging to groups and the supports these groups offer are a significant factor in life after ABI.

On the role of family

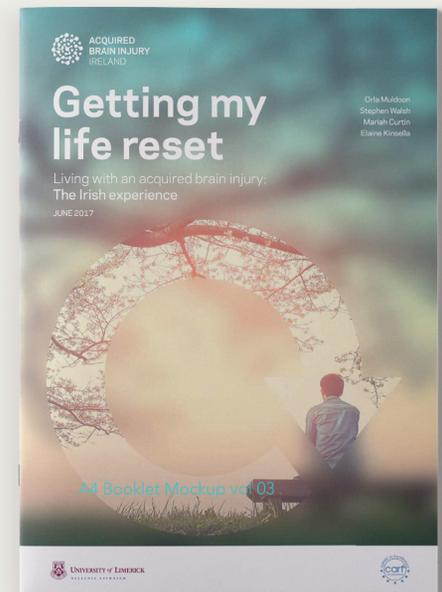
A novel finding is that family groups exert both positive and negative effects that appear to constitute both a social cure (enrichment and facilitating engagement) and a social curse (disempowering role of families due to the way social identities are reconstructed in the aftermath of injury).

On the role of group activity

For the participants in our study, social and community re-integration post-injury rather than recovery was the relevant goal. This was often achieved by being with others and doing group activities. More social contact and connections with others, including peers, family or friends was used by participants as a marker of their improvement and recovery. Our findings suggest that acceptance and adaptation to life post-injury was implicitly linked to gain in social identity resources.

On the role of rehabilitation

Overall our findings highlight the centrality of collective dimensions of identity to adjustment to ABI. This adds to a growing body of evidence that argues that long term social identity management, rather than disability management per se, is crucial to support those affected by ABI. In practical terms this management requires support of existing social identities and more particularly new groups that offer access and engagement with meaningful activity.



SELECTED REFERENCES

- Muldoon, O. T., Acharya, K., Jay, S., Adhikari, K., Pettigrew, J., & Lowe, R. D. (2017). Community identity and collective efficacy: A social cure for traumatic stress in post-earthquake Nepal. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 47*, 7, 904-915.
- Ponsford, J. (2013). Working with families. In J. Ponsford, S. Sloan, & P. Snow (Eds.), *Traumatic Brain Injury: Rehabilitation for everyday adaptive living* (2nd ed., pp. 226-261). Hove: Psychology Press.
- Walsh, R. S., Muldoon, O. T., Gallagher, S., & Fortune, D. G. (2015). Affiliative and "self-as-doer" identities: relationships between social identity, social support, and emotional status amongst survivors of acquired brain injury (ABI). *Neuropsychological rehabilitation, 25*(4), 555-573.