

Cinderella's Privilege, Childhood Trauma, and the Lost Voice: Script

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Presenter: Rebecca Anderson

Assistant Research Professor

Applied Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University

Slide 1. Presentation Title and Caution. Thank you for taking the time to join me as I apply novel lenses to a familiar tale. I'll begin with a caution: Please be aware the presentation focuses on extreme childhood abuse and contains emotionally difficult content.

Slide 2. Presentation Overview. My original presentation isn't a fit for the time constraints of this session. Instead, today, I focus on a single version of Cinderella: the 1998 movie, *Ever After: A Cinderella Story*. I examine this version through the lens of the CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences Study. I address the issues of trauma and the lost voice in this presentation. Their impact on privilege is covered in my in-development journal article.

Slide 3. Types of Childhood Trauma. To begin my presentation: development of the Adverse Childhood Experience assessment comes from one of the largest investigations identifying connections between

childhood abuse and neglect and

later-life health and well being.

This study was conducted from 1995-1997 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente. Based on physical exams and confidential surveys completed by 17,000 Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) members, researchers developed the 10-question ACE assessment. These 10 questions focus on types of childhood trauma.

One of the significant take-aways from this assessment is that higher scores often correlate to later-life health and well-being challenges.

Slide 4. *Ever After.*

Now for my analysis of the 1998 movie, *Ever After: A Cinderella Story*. This movie begins when the Cinderella, named Danielle de Barbarac, is 8 years old. Her mother has passed away. Her father is a wealthy widow. Danielle is her father's much-loved only child. A small staff of household servants feature in the movie. Like Danielle's father, they also dote on her. Until the age of 8, she experiences a loving and nurturing childhood that enables her to begin developing into an intelligent and emotionally strong and confident young girl. We, the audience, see her expressing these characteristics as she interacts with her father, the servants, and her best friend. As a young adult, Danielle appears to continue expressing this intelligence and confidence in her interactions with servants, her friend, and, to a certain extent, any new people she meets. However, dramatic changes in her family introduce changes in Danielle that we notice almost exclusively in her interactions with her family members.

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The movie begins after Danielle's father has just remarried the Baroness Rodmilla de Ghent. Rodmilla has two young daughters, Marguerite and Jacqueline. They are about the same age as Danielle.

Almost immediately after introducing his new wife and two stepdaughters to Danielle and the servants, Danielle's father experiences a fatal heart attack and dies. The movie then skips ahead 10 years. Based on what happens after the time shift, it's evident that Danielle's happy childhood ended with her father's death. The movie provides evidence that Danielle subsequently experiences years of abuse associated with 6 different Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Surface changes to Danielle's circumstances are significant: from a beloved daughter, she has been transformed into one of the family servants. Although legally she is a member of the family, her status as a family member is nominal. She has been marginalized. Unlike her stepsisters, she toils alongside the family servants. She works in the fields, she helps prepare meals for her stepmother and stepsisters. While they dine, she does not. Instead, she serves them. [Emotional Abuse ACE]

Danielle is also deprived of basic resources and care that Rodmilla provides Danielle's stepsisters. For instance, she dresses in old and dirty clothes while their clothing is not only clean but luxurious [Physical Neglect ACE]

Throughout the movie, her stepmother repeatedly disparages and expresses contempt for Danielle. For example, Rodmilla explicitly criticizes the untidy appearance of the stepdaughter whom she has deprived of the ability to maintain a tidy appearance [Mental Illness] As an 18-year old young woman, Danielle legally has the right to reject her stepmother's criticism, reject her forced labor, and simply leave the home. She does not do any of that. Instead, she earnestly responds to Rodmilla's impossible criticism, expressing her need for guidance which Rodmilla rebuffs. [Emotional Neglect ACE]

Throughout the movie, Rodmilla and Marguerite subject Danielle to sadistic abuse. For instance, they appropriate the gown and shoes that Danielle's mother left her as part of her dowry and deny her right to protest. Marguerite threatens to destroy Danielle's treasured book unless Danielle hands over her belongings, then destroys the book anyway even after Danielle complies. Rodmilla does not acknowledge her own responsibility for provoking the conflict in the first place. Nor does she punish Marguerite for her part in this confrontation. Not punishing Marguerite is appropriate: Marguerite is an adult. However, Rodmilla inappropriately subjects the injured party – Danielle – to a brutal whipping. [Physical Abuse] Here, again, in this movie version of the Cinderella tale that blends 20th century norms with 20th century ideas about the 16th century setting, Danielle is depicted as a young adult who – as a young adult – possesses certain rights she does not exercise. She doesn't have to submit to Rodmilla's whipping. Yet she does.

Rodmilla commits her last and most significant abuse of her stepdaughter when she sells Danielle to Pierre le Pieu to clear her own debts.

-Once more, it should be noted that Danielle has rights that are being denied: Rodmilla doesn't have the right to sell Danielle, and le Pieu doesn't have the right to buy her.

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Given the movie encounter between Danielle and the wealthy le Pieu that signals a long-standing dynamic fraught with sexual menace directed toward Danielle, this act of aggression appears to represent Rodmilla's final attempt to literally destroy Danielle. [Sexual Abuse]

Slide 5. Cinderella's Sibling: Empathy Deficits. Now I'm going to shift to a new perspective on the abuse of Danielle, who is the movie Cinderella. I'm going to look at the Cinderella alternate – Jacqueline – and the empathy deficits that she exhibits.

Like Danielle, Jacqueline is depicted as a child who is targeted for marginalization and abuse. Yet just as Jacqueline is trained to think about herself as marginalized, she is also trained to think about and act toward her stepsister in ways that position her as more marginalized. The movie presents a nuanced depiction of this training in action. Through the series of events occurring before, during, and after the appropriation of Danielle's dowry, we, the movie audience, have the opportunity to track Jacqueline's progress from initially pushing back on Danielle's ill treatment to joining in and contributing to it.

This trajectory takes place over 4 different scenes.

Scene 1. Rodmilla takes her daughters to Danielle's room to look at Danielle's dowry: a beautiful court dress and shoes left to Danielle by her mother. Just as they decide that Marguerite will appropriate Danielle's dowry and wear it to the royal ball, Danielle happens to return to her room. "What are you doing?" she asks. When Rodmilla and Marguerite lie to her, Jacqueline reacts with visible disgust at their deception, and abruptly leaves the room.

Scene 2. In this scene, Rodmilla, Marguerite, and Jacqueline wake Danielle who has failed to prepare their breakfast because she has overslept. Instead of responding meekly to their demands, she is assertive. Marguerite explodes in anger. Danielle doesn't back down, and Jacqueline grins to herself as Marguerite sputters. Jacqueline's grin disappears, however, at her mother's command: "Jacqueline, go and boil some water." "Me? Boil water?" she replies, incredulous. "Oh, I knew it. I just knew it," she declares as she flounces out of the room.

Scene 3. Later, Danielle enters the house to find Rodmilla, Marguerite, and Jacqueline going through her mother's dowry once again. Danielle confronts them, and Marguerite and Rodmilla respond with manipulative comments and insults. The confrontation becomes violent. Danielle is brutally whipped.

Scene 4. In the final scene of this sequence, we see Jacqueline tending to Danielle's wounds. Her tone and facial expressions convey sympathy for Danielle. The words that she says to Danielle, however, explicitly blame Danielle for her own victimization. Specifically, she says, "Now, you really brought this upon yourself, you know." Of course, this is false. Danielle does not deserve what happened to her any more than Jacqueline herself deserves her mother's frequent put downs. What is happening here is that Jacqueline is upholding the dysfunctional family system.

On some level of consciousness, Jacqueline recognizes the precariousness of her status in the family. She knows she is next. If anything happens to remove Danielle from the primary scapegoat

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role, Jacqueline will take her place. The movie depicts her as acting in ways designed to maintain the current order and to resist the change that will alter her status from bad to worse.

The more-favored siblings in such profoundly dysfunctional family systems often don't have well-developed understandings of the dynamic that they are supporting. Although Jacqueline's words are explicit and convey nuanced understandings, this appearance can be misleading. The movie provides no evidence that Jacqueline has insight into her behaviors as she progresses from pushing back on the dowry theft to joining her sister and mother in going through Danielle's dowry to telling Danielle that she brought her stepmother's abuse upon herself.

Slide 6. Recovering Authentic Voice. This concludes my brief analysis of *Ever After's* fictional depiction of severe childhood abuse. I move now to these questions:

How does fictional Danielle recover her authentic voice?

How do real-life Cinderellas recover their authentic voices?

The authentic voice of a Cinderella has been injured, disrupted, and obscured from their own emotional understanding. Cinderellas have been told they are less than through a multimodal tapestry, from words that are manipulative lies to physical injuries to facial expressions of disgust and disdain, etc. and so forth. The false identity of a Cinderella has been constructed not just through cognitive learning but as a felt emotional experience – minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, and year after year.

For the movie Cinderella – Danielle – a confluence of events rouses her sense of authentic self – enough so that she is able to fight back and overthrow the tyranny of her stepfamily. However, she still needs to heal the injuries to her identity. She needs to take apart each brick of identity that was forged within the system of family dysfunction – memories, feelings, emotions, assumptions, beliefs, practices, behaviors – and not simply re-think, but emotionally re-experience, all of this through adult emotionally healthy perspectives.

The happy ending of the movie *Ever After* is profoundly misleading. Having forged and maintained reasonably good relationships with servants and friends and people on the periphery of family, Danielle may be able to maintain these kinds of reasonably harmonious connections, moving forward. The primary danger for Danielle is in her ability to negotiate relationships with her new nuclear family, which is now the royal family.

Family for her has been an internalized experience of trauma. If Danielle does not heal herself, she is vulnerable to perpetuating the trauma of her childhood within her new family, much as Rodmilla perpetuated her own childhood trauma on her children, a trauma that we glimpse only briefly when Rodmilla tells Danielle: “My mother was hard on me too, you know. She taught me that cleanliness was next to godliness. She forced me to wash my face at least 20 times a day, convinced it was never clean enough.”

Slide 7. Integration. The only way to healing, wellness, and integration for Cinderellas is not magical and it's not quick. Cinderellas may have a cognitive understanding about the abuse inflicted on them. They may have a cognitive understanding that the abuse is wrong and that they

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don't deserve it. Maybe they have this surface-level understanding. Emotionally, it's a different story. Their emotional understandings often do not match their cognitive understandings. Their emotional understandings are forged memory by memory. And that's where - and how - they need to heal. Cinderellas need to access their landscape of memories, and excavate them: memory by memory. For each memory, Cinderellas need to ask questions such as:

What happened? What was the sequence of events? How did I feel, and why? What was the trajectory of my emotions? What was I paying attention to? Why was I paying attention to this, and not that? What was the context? Who were the other people involved? What were they doing? Why were they doing it? And so on and so forth.

Cinderellas' interrogation needs to be nuanced, granular, and, above all, iterative.

Childish perspectives are packaged into childhood memories. The trauma of the moment or of the time period also gets locked in to the memory. Taking a memory, especially a traumatic memory, and unpacking it – taking it apart, turning it around and upside down and inside out – helps the Cinderella see the memory from new and fresh perspectives that can change surface-level cognitive understandings to deeper emotional understandings that enable healing and well being.

Slide 8. Thank you for taking the time to join me today! I welcome your questions and comments.

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Applied Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University

**EMOTIONALLY
DIFFICULT CONTENT**

Presentation Outline

- CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACE Study Overview
- Ever After, and ACE Score
 - Health, Wellbeing, and Opportunity Impacts
- Outcomes. Adult Landscape Mediated by Childhood Trauma
 - Vulnerability to Violence as Victim and/or Victimizer
- Retrieving Voice to Exercise Privilege. A Roadmap for Adult Survivors

ABUSE



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

NEGLECT



Physical



Emotional

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION



Mental Illness



Mother treated violently



Divorce



Incarcerated Relative



Substance Abuse

1995-1997 CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study

Ever After: A Cinderella Story

1998. 20th Century Fox

ACE = 6

Abuse



Emotional



Physical



Sexual

Neglect



Emotional



Physical

Household Dysfunction



Mental Illness

Cinderella's Sibling: Empathy Deficits



Retrieving Authentic Self Begins with Excavation





Retrieving Authentic Self Leads to Integration

**Thank you! I welcome your
questions and comments.**

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