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This paper considers the concept of resilience and how the natural qualities supportive of resilience in children and families can best be nurtured. It argues that there is an emerging crisis in bureaucratised child protection systems that alienates and undermines both social workers and clients, and that runs counter to the spirit of resilience-led practice. Responding to this crisis requires a new emphasis on relationships, strengths and the clients' social context in child and family social work. It also requires practitioners and students to reflect carefully on the nature of helping. The paper explores some of the implications of these ideas for social work practice, education and policy.

Keywords: Resilience; Relationships; Networks; Strengths; Context; Helping

Social work serves people experiencing adversity. People displaying resilience avoid the full impact of adversity. Protective factors shield them from the worst effects of negative experience. It follows therefore that social workers should be interested in the concept of resilience and in the protective factors that may underpin it. In child and family work, these protective factors are often strengths in the make up of children and young people and in the contexts (family, school and other social groupings) within which they live (Gilligan, 2001a,b). Children who display resilience in the face of adversity

  demonstrate that children are protected not only by the self-righting nature of development, but also by the actions of adults, by their own actions, by the nurturing of their assets, by opportunities to succeed and by the experience of success. (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 216)

According to Luthar et al. (2000, p. 543)

  Resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity.

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Three elements are thus seen as essential to understanding resilience. It arises from a process and results in positive adaptation in the face of adversity. A person may display resilience in the face of adversity in three different ways—by ‘overcoming the odds ... [or] sustaining competence under pressure ... [or] recovering from trauma’ (Fraser et al., 1999, p. 136).

Resilience is not some form of moral fibre randomly allocated by some mysterious process to certain fortunate people. While resilience may previously have been seen as residing in the person as a fixed trait, it is now more usefully considered as a variable quality that derives from a process of repeated interactions between a person and favourable features of the surrounding context in a person’s life. The degree of resilience displayed by a person in a certain context may be said to be related to the extent to which that context has elements that nurture this resilience.

It may be helpful to think of a person’s trajectory of development displaying resilience at certain points or over certain periods in their life. In other words, the trajectory of development in a given phase is more positive than might be expected given the adverse circumstances. It may also be the case that resilience may be evident in one domain of functioning, for example school or workplace, yet not in another, for example, the family. It does not follow therefore that the quality of resilience is displayed to the same degree in each domain.

Protective factors that may enhance resilience emerge within supportive contexts and relationships. A number of these contexts and relationship sets will now be considered in order to illuminate how resilience may operate—firstly the key relationships in the lives of children and families, then their relationships with the wider world and then relationships with professionals specifically. This will lead into a discussion of the possible implications of a strengths/resilience-led approach for social work practice, education and policy.

Relationships with Key People—The Importance of a Sense of Having a ‘Secure Base’ in the World

Secure attachments supply the child with a reliable ‘secure base’ that encourages—and renders safe—exploration of the wider world (Bowlby, 1988). Such a sense of a ‘secure base’ in daily living may be cultivated by a person’s sense of belonging within supportive social networks, by attachment type relationships to reliable and responsive people, and by routines and structures in their lives.

Hill (2002) rightly cautions against excessively optimistic views of social networks. Networks can be a source of stress and hurt when relations with network members are troubled, but where sufficient positive energy flows through networks, they can be a powerful and often preferred source of help, support and connectedness for children and adults. The growing child may have a hierarchy of attachment relationships (Trinke & Batholomew, 1997; Holmes, 1993). Lesser attachments may assume greater protective significance where more primary ones prove unsatisfactory. For siblings living in circumstances of family stress or breakdown, sibling relationships and support may become very important (Caya & Liem, 1998;
McTeigue, 1998). When home life is difficult, grandparents and extended kin may provide very important 'arenas of comfort' (Thiede Call, 1996). Other adults outside the family may also be very important, for instance teachers, neighbours and mentors (Smith & Carlson, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 209; Gilligan, 2001a). It is worth stressing that it is not necessary for the child or adult to have a primary attachment to a person in order for positive value to accrue from the relationship.

For a young person without a viable 'secure base' in their immediate or extended family of origin, a 'base camp' or scaffolding of social support based on work, social, educational, recreational and professional helping relationships is probably the best practical alternative. A major task of care takers and care providers in adolescence is to help a young person to develop such a scaffolding or network of relationships which may serve as an important buffer in coping with the stressors of life (Schofield, 1999, pp. 21–31).

It is suggested that naturally occurring opportunities in daily living may ultimately prove more therapeutic than attempts at helping that are specially devised or engineered. Daily or regular routines and rituals in family and school may often help children to begin to recover from the effects of stress in their lives. Familiar routines at home around meals, bedtime stories, getting up, or family outings may prove important sources of a sense of order and structure. Similarly, at school, rituals around the start of the day, a consistent daily greeting from the teacher, reassuringly predictable management of the classroom space, regular arrangements around break time and so on, may also help to preserve or restore a sense of order in the child’s life, and promote a sense of attachment or secure base. Additionally, great reassurance may lie in annual and seasonal celebrations and rituals, within the family, school or beyond. As Sandler et al. (1989) observe 'rituals have symbolic significance in that they signify ... collective identity and continuity'. A child or adult may find in them a sense of order, in a life otherwise dominated by disorder.

Structure and routine may thus be protective in the lives of children living in families subject to stress (Bennet et al., 1988). In their study of parental alcoholism, these researchers found that children were more protected from paternal alcoholism when the family was still intact enough to be able to plan and carry off rituals—ceremonies, traditions and routines—which symbolised, presumably, a vital order for the child. They use the term 'deliberate family process' to describe the pattern. The message for those in child and family social work would seem to be to value and promote opportunities for family members to mark and celebrate their identity as 'family'. This sense of 'family' may, for example, serve to protect against some of the developmentally debilitating effects of disharmony associated with parental problem drinking (Velleman & Orford, 1999).

Relationships in the Wider World—The Importance of ‘Multiplicty of Role Identities’ and ‘Meaningful Roles’

Research tends to confirm the instincts of ‘common sense’ that it is protective for mental (and physical) health to have multiple role identities (Lahelma et al., 2002;
Harris, 1993; Thoits, 1983). Let us take as an example a young lone mother living on a low income. Let us assume she is estranged from family and isolated from neighbours. She may only have the role of mother to play in her everyday life. The restrictiveness and isolation of her role as mother may have a negative effect on her morale and access to social support, and thereby on her parental effectiveness and commitment. If, on the other hand, she is able to secure good child care, and attends local adult education classes, and has a part-time job, and is involved in supporting the local girls’ football team, then she has a repertoire of social identities and opportunities strengthened by her social roles as student, employee, work colleague and football supporter. It is likely that her mental health and thereby her parenting will be enhanced by a broader set of identities embracing adult woman as well as mother (Featherstone, 1999, pp. 43–53). She will feel better about herself and will gain encouragement from the interest and support of others she encounters in her varied and meaningful roles (Bifulco & Moran, 1998).

It is clear that adult education, community development, job placement/training and good quality child care all have a part to play in strengthening the parent–child relationship in this example (Yoshikawa, 1994). The key intervention in this instance may be to encourage and support the young woman to tap into these resources that are available in the community. This may take time, sensitivity, skill and much encouragement. The pay-off may often be subtle but very real. A recent American study, for example, shows an association between better reading outcomes in their children for poor African American mothers with better educational attainment and higher maths scores for children whose mothers had even intermittent employment experience (Jackson, 2003).

Relationships in the Wider World—The Importance of School and of Neighbourhoods and Community Development

The support that schools may offer children and families may go largely unrecognised (Gilligan, 1998). School presents many developmental opportunities to children through academic, sporting and social experience (Gilligan, 1998; Sylva, 1994; Blatchford, 1998). Teachers can serve as confidants and mentors, and guarantors of a child’s welfare. A sense of ‘membership’ of a school may have great psychological and social value for a vulnerable child (Wehlage et al., 1989). Any benefits of school experience do not seem to be confined to those who have the necessary academic ability and who lack serious social problems. New Zealand and British studies underline the helpful effects of the social and academic impact of school in the long term development of women recovering from childhood sexual abuse and life in care, respectively (Romans et al., 1995; Rutter et al., 1995, p. 81).

Neighbourhood social organisation may play a key role in the quality of life of local residents (Wilson, 1996), something of importance for children and child rearing households in a neighbourhood. Schools may also serve as a vital local resource in run-down neighbourhoods drained of other facilities (Thompson, 1995,
p. 174) and may help to promote and sustain a sense of community in hard-pressed inner cities (Searle, 1996). Thompson (1995, p. 164) argues that strengthening 'needy neighbourhoods' may 'promise greater success than could piecemeal efforts over a broader geographical net to strengthen non-local social support on a family-by-family basis'. Thus there is a very strong case that community development has to be a central part of any comprehensive child welfare and family support strategy in disadvantaged communities.

Relationships with Professionals—The Importance of a 'Therapeutic Alliance'

Parents or family members who have grown alienated from, or disillusioned with, mainstream services may take a long time to engage with the service of a social worker or a family support professional or volunteer. Trust in the good intentions of the helper may take a long time to emerge. *Time* and a focus on the building of relationship as an initial end in itself become crucial (Morrison Dore & Alexander, 1996). Unless a 'therapeutic alliance' is formed, it may well be that nothing very productive will come from the helping relationship. As Harris' (1993) telling metaphor suggests, help may be more valuable coming in the form of a 'milk van' (low key, discreet, inobtrusive, nurturing, regular, reliable, long term) rather than a 'fire brigade' (sudden, one off, invasive, crisis driven, hyped).

Issues for Social Work Practice, Policy and Education

My argument is based on a belief that many assets, resources and opportunities, which can make a positive difference in children’s and families’ lives, lie waiting to be tapped. It is also based on a belief in the self-healing and self-righting capacity that can often be observed in children and young people as they grow up.

Those tempted to call this view naive should take care to look at the whole picture, and remember that strengths may lie in unlikely places (Saleebey, 1997). The issue, perhaps, is not so much whether strengths lie out there waiting to be spotted, but whether professionals have the eyes to see them. Strangely, professionals may be poor at identifying or recognising such strengths. Despite being highly trained, their assessment skills may be curiously one-dimensional, preoccupied with deficits and pathology, at the expense of any attention to strengths. Yet looking for strengths can really turn practice around. As the leading Australian family therapist, Michael Durrant, puts it in his book on residential child care:

> My experience is that, the more I strive (and, sometimes, struggle) to see my clients as competent and successful so the more they tend to demonstrate these characteristics (and, at the same time, the more I simply don’t notice their deficits or pathology). (Durrant, 1993, p. 186)

Professional assessment needs to focus on strengths as well as deficits, on protective as well as risk factors (Werner & Smith, 1992; Gilligan, 2001b). It also needs to recognise that strengths do *not* stem solely from the actions of professionals or the activities of services. Help, also, flows from many sources, not just from the
intervention of social workers or other professionals. What proves to be therapeutic and helpful in a given situation may frequently be very mundane and ordinary. Therapy does not necessarily need a white coat or a clinic.

Professional humility is important. It is important to value both techniques of intervention and non-intervention. It is important that we train social workers to restrain the urge for intervention, and to temper any assumption that change begins and ends with anything they may do. It is hard to eradicate notions of rescue and omnipotence. People may become very attached to the excitement and action of intervention. Adapting Tirril Harris’ (1993) wonderful metaphor about helping, some workers may prefer the drama and excitement of the ‘fire brigade’ rather than the low-key routine of the ‘milk van’. Some helpers may find more reward or meaning in the pursuit of adrenalin, whereas it might, in fact, be more productive to seek reward in the search for meaning, rather than in what might be termed ‘the chase for adrenalin’.

It may be better to think of the social work role with children and families as often being about helping to release positive processes rather than seeking to create or direct such processes. The relevant processes are often operating beneath the surface in terms of the professionals’ gaze. They may also be triggered by inclinations other than altruism on the part of the person who stimulates the process. The motives of the ‘natural’ helper may not, of course, be uncomplicated. In the following example, the grandfather’s interest in passing on the skills of his trade to his grandson may have been about more than an altruistic concern for the boy. He might also have been hoping to bequeath his skills and his memory to posterity. But for the person concerned to mobilise and harness helping processes, the exact nature of the helpers’ motivation is a secondary concern when compared with what such motivation might deliver.

Grandfather Handing on Skills of French Polishing—A Case Example of Natural Helping

A grandfather, who had been a French polisher, began to teach his skills to his grandson who was an adolescent living in a children’s home. The head of the home allowed the youngster to use ‘a shed out the back’ to practise his new-found skill. He was able to get some work from staff and neighbours. This was an example of the professional—the head of the home—using his influence to release positive energy in the grandfather-grandson relationship and add a resource which assisted the fullest exploitation (in the best sense) of what the grandfather had to offer. Lending the shed reflected practice of a very high standard, a practice sensitive to the layers of meaning in the grandfather’s generosity to his grandson. This transmission of a skill was not only giving the young person a social niche, a meaningful role, a means of enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy, it was also helping the youngster to connect with traditions in his family of origin and thereby assisting his sense of belonging and identity as part of that family grouping. It was also helping the boy ease into the world of work. He ultimately found a niche as a French polisher in adulthood.
The fictional but authentic story of *Billy Elliot* in the film of the same name provides another excellent example of protective factors at work in a potentially vulnerable young person’s life. The chance discovery of a talent for ballet in the young Billy and the supportive relationships that nurture this talent prove a turning point in his life.

These examples underline the importance of skills in working not just with clients but also with collaterals (Specht, 1985), work not just with the person but also with the scaffolding of relationships supporting their functioning and development (Vygotsky, 1986). Part of the challenge facing us going in to the future is not only spelling out what needs to be done, if even that is clear, but also *how* it is to be done (Gilligan, 2000). It is not enough to identify for social workers what they should be doing—we must also help them by showing them models for how to do what is to be done. In the current vogue in social science there is perhaps excessive emphasis on posing problems, rather than posing solutions. We need to focus, for example, on developing models for practice that can accommodate the tensions and complexity of successful co-working with critically important groups such as foster carers and teachers.

**The Challenge for Social Work Education**

Resilience thinking raises many issues for social work education. One key question is whether students are being educated and trained to work with *the world as it is* or with *the world as it should be*, in terms of the agency settings and ideologies in which they find themselves? Is there to be stress on valued practice principles, for example, a focus on strengths in clients, or is the emphasis to be on what agency management may think important—for example, their latest policy or set of procedures? Do we train our students to assume *professional* responsibility or to assume *procedural* responsibility? Houston (2001) suggests our task is to help students ‘to understand what is, what can be, and what should be’.

**The View of Clients**

Clients—and their histories—are not administrative commodities to be accumulated and traded on computers or on hard copy files. Their lives cannot be comprehended, in all the senses of that word, in a set of case conference minutes, or the leaves of case files, or the full completion of a file template on a computer. If clients feel alienated from what public social services offer them in many countries, it may be because these clients do not feel fully heard, fully recognised, fully understood, fully affirmed in their encounters with social services.

One of the paradoxes of bureaucratic responses by agencies to clients is that the fundamental interests of clients may be felt to threaten those of agencies and, even more ominously in ethical terms, the fundamental interests of agencies may be felt to threaten those of clients. Agencies may see clients as carrying risks for the agency. Clients may, in turn, see agencies as bearing risk for the client.
Even worse, anxious agencies or anxious agency management can begin to see front line staff as bearing risks for the agency, risks they seek to close down by proceduralising practice. A gap may open up in which front line staff and agency management seem to lose contact. Front line staff feel unheard, their experiences may go unrecognised by management, and the rhetoric of agency policy may go unheeded or even unheard by agency front-liners. All of the players seem trapped in a dance of mutual blame and distancing. This becomes manifest in problems of low morale and poor staff retention in public social work and child protection services (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Gilligan, 2000; McMahon, 1998; Furlong, 1997; Gibbs & Keating, 1999; Spence et al., 1999).

How do we respond to the proliferation of a system that simultaneously alienates clients and staff? It may be worth questioning the future of such a system. It certainly is essential to argue that it is not beyond question. The problems are too pervasive in too many countries for the issue to be beyond debate, for the system to be beyond question.

My mother died in a hospice almost two years ago, following a losing battle with lung cancer. My father and I, their only child, were overwhelmed by the quality of care and patient-centred way the hospice worked. It was a truly uplifting experience. And it was even more a shock when contrasted with many of our experiences in mainstream hospitals. The hospice model challenges many of the failures of the highly technocratic hospital. Can we imagine a hospice-like alternative in children's services to the highly technocratic or bureaucratic child protection systems that seem to be gaining hegemony in many (certainly anglophone) western societies? Our challenge for those who believe in the possibility—or indeed the necessity—of another way is to begin to articulate, declare and test out another model just as the hospice movement has done. One of the key messages of healing is that of hope, hope that things can be different, that they can be better.

If management has little hope in social work, if social workers begin to have little hope in social work (at least as conceived in public social services), if clients have little hope in social work, then from where is hope for social work to come? Ironically, social work itself seems to be in need of some of its own medicine. Hope is one of the precious gifts that good social work can instil. Now it seems as if social work itself desperately needs an injection of such hope. Where is it to come from?

In response, my suggestion would be that we in social work education may have to be witnesses to, and messengers of, such hope. We must strive to reassert a professional practice based on supervision rather than one based on proceduralism. We must challenge the relentless bureaucratisation of social work practice, and the bureaucratisation of responses to client need. The urge to bureaucratisate may stem from good intentions, but good intentions do not necessarily lead to good outcomes. We must recognise the toxic effects on workers and clients—and the service—of bureaucratisation (Cooper et al., 2003; McMahon, 1998).

Social work education in its dialogue with students or practitioners must not indulge solely in the luxury of posing problems, it must also risk posing solutions. The right to raise questions somehow carries a duty to suggest answers.
How do we help students—and practitioners—to see clients as ‘competent and successful’ to quote Michael Durrant again? Seeing clients as successful and competent may be one of the ways of escaping the negative dance in which I have suggested the players are trapped. Key to this also is recognising that problem is not destiny (Clarke & Clarke, 2000). Problems should not come to define the whole identity, the whole person, the whole future.

Sometimes, clients may be ‘competent and successful’ in facets of their lives that we fail to see. There are whole domains of a client’s life and functioning that typically social workers and other ‘hit and run’ professionals may never even glimpse. How do we get people to look ‘outside the box’ in terms of seeing the whole client and in terms of responding to their whole needs? How do we help students and practitioners to expose themselves to clients without the props and shield of agency procedures? How do we help students to internalise and own competency/strength based models of practice, if we are unable to furnish them with fieldwork opportunities, which exemplify such approaches? How do we help students to tone down the anxiety in themselves and in the agency, which seems to be one of the blocks to their tolerance for the ambiguity and uncertainty of working in a more strengths-led way?

In responding to such challenges, I think one of the most fruitful areas may be to invite students to reflect deeply on the nature and sources of helping. Their task is not just to deliver help, they are not the exclusive source of help, the onus is not solely on them. This is not merely a message that frees them of a burden, it is profoundly important in understanding what actually makes a difference in people’s lives. The worker’s task, more than helping, may be to see where help is flowing, or potentially flowing, in the client’s context. ‘Social work is not the only show in town.’ We need to ask questions such as what is this client doing well? What is this client doing—knowingly or unknowingly—which is helping their situation? What things are other people doing—knowingly or unknowingly—which are helping the situation? Where can professional help fit into this—in a way that does not divert, or dry up, the flow of positive help from ‘natural’ sources. Healing qualities such as insight, compassion, patience, tolerance, or humour, are not the sole preserve of professionals, indeed these qualities may be in more plentiful supply in the ‘nature reserve of life’ or in ‘life in the wild’. Without an excessive emphasis on ego-centrism or self pre-occupation, students might learn a lot from committed reflection on what and whom have been helpful to them in their life pathway to this point and in resolving or managing strains and stresses along the way. Reflecting on their own strengths, and from where they draw them, may help students to tap into client strengths and from where they are drawn. Valuing client strengths may help students to be more respectful of client experience and lived reality. It may also help the student to be sometimes able to ‘go one down’, an important stance therapeutically in work with clients, and one in contrast with the ‘one up’ position often adopted by professionals in their relationships with clients.

In conclusion, one of our challenges is to re-instate the significance of the term ‘social’ in social work and social service, we must understand clients in their social
context, and we must respond to their needs by harnessing all the strengths of that social context. In the coming period of development in social work education, I would suggest that we should strive to assert the vital importance of working with strengths in clients, families, social groups, communities, schools and service systems. Building on the best of traditions, know-how, solidarity and commitment in the client, professional and policy worlds, we can come closer to helping build better futures for children and families.

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