The Resilience Report

Executive Summary: Voices from the front line on The Place and Meaning of Resilience in Social Work Practice

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"Our research supports the views of practitioners who believe resilience, or rather a lack of it, is being used as a way to blame individuals for not coping with ever-increasing workloads, ever-diminishing resources, and significant political, structural and organisational failings" (The Guardian, 31st July 2019)

Introduction

A fundamental pre-requisite to ensure that children and their families are given the best possible help, support, and protection is a stable and experienced work force. This requires the development of resilient social workers able to provide effective support to children and families.

These aims have been frustrated by the issue of recruitment and retention, which has been consistently identified in recent years as among the biggest risks facing children's services. The positive effect of a stable, and experienced, workforce cannot be underestimated when one considers the reduced staff turnover leads to better service provision (Community Care, 2017).

However, recent analysis of the children and family social work workforce in England from the Department of Education suggest these issues continue to persist. Figures suggest 35% of social workers leave their local authority within 2 years, whilst 33% leave within 5 years. This means 68% of FTE children and family social workers were in service in their local authority for less than 5 years.

In seeking to address this ongoing issue the professions regulator has introduced a requirement that social workers demonstrate resilience as a professional capability. The notion of resilience has increasingly been linked to the professionalism of social work practitioners working with children and familes. In the first instance, responding to the potential trauma children's social workers experience (Horwitz, 1998) and latterly to embrace the more generic experience of social workers across the profession (Collins, 2007).

Interestingly, and of significance to this research, are concerns for practitioner wellbeing were motivated by what appears to be an operational need within children and family services to "develop strategies for promoting optimal effectiveness" (Horwitz, p.363) amongst the workforce and to discover "what might enable [some] workers to persist, endure and thrive in their careers" (Collins 2007, p. 256). This association with workforce development concerns and individual practitioner wellbeing

persists within the literature. Gail Kinman and Louise Grant's 'Developing Resilience for Social Work Practice' (Kinman and Grant, 2014) for example seeks to do just as the title suggests through the provision of 'resilience techniques' aimed at managing within, what they concede is, an increasingly complex and challenging work environment.

Currently resilience is considered a professional capability (PCF) and standard of proficiency (SoP) by Social Work England, the British Association of Social Work and the HCPC. For example

- 3.14 Assess the influence of cultural and social factors over people and the effect of loss, change and uncertainty in the development of resilience. (Social Work England, 2019)

- 1.Professionalism (Readiness for direct practice): can describe the importance of self-care and emotional resilience in social work (BASW, 2018,p16)

- 3.6 be able to identify and apply strategies to build professional resilience (HCPC,2017)

There is no suggestion of how these might be met , or achieved, just an acceptance of their importance to being a professional social worker. The continuing issue of recruitment and retention in social work with children and families would suggest, for some, resilience is absent within the workforce. This research sought to find out why?

Background to this Research

Anecdotal information shared with the authors by children and family social work practitioners suggested 'resilience' is being used by employers to focus on individuals' failures, rather than exploring the wider context of practice. Workers told the authors resilience is being used to divert attention away from failures in the system, caused by significant issues such as funding cuts and <u>workforce churn</u>.

This prompted the authors to research the place and meaning of resilience in social work practice.

Aim

To discover practitioners experience of the place and meaning of resilience in social work practice.

Research Objectives

The research objectives were to:

• develop understanding of the place and meaning of 'resilience' in contemporary organisational contexts

• enable professionals to contribute to a public discussion on the place and meaning of 'resilience' in professional practice

• inform curricula development on social work qualifying programmes

Methodology

An online survey was used to generate data. Participants were self-selecting in terms of age, gender, level of experience, ethnicity and geographical location. The inclusion criteria was that they must be a H.C.P.C Registered social worker.

Participants accessed the survey via a 'think' piece was published online by both The Guardian Social Care Network and Community Care.

The survey contained 6 structured introductory questions which provided demographic data i.e. age; gender; qualification; route to qualification; years qualified; job title. Four further open questions were asked which allowed participants to use free text in their answers.

The research team undertook a thematic analysis of the non-structured open data collated within the survey.

Research Findings

- When asked "How does your organisation/employer define Resilience?" Participants appear to have limited knowledge of how their employer/ organisation defined resilience, with 48% of participants responding to this question with answers such as; unclear , unknown, it does'nt, I don't know.

- The remaining 52% of responses were based on individuals experience in practice rather than explicit organisational policy. No participants explicitly, or implicitly, referred to policy or guidance from their agency.

- Responses suggested participants had their own definition of resilience, which was unlikely to be that of their organisation/employer, i.e. "not going off sick........"

- When asked "What do you understand by the term 'resilience'?" thematic analysis overwhelmingly reveals an embedded belief that resilience relates to responding to adversity on an individualised basis.

- Participants repeatedly referred to attributes that an individual innately has or must develop i.e. the ability to recover from set backs, ability to withstand or bounce back; ability to spring back; personal capacity to withstand; the body's coping mechanism.

- A significant theme was a belief that whatever the difficult/unpleasant situation is, it should be borne by an individual on an individualized basis, where the individual needs to develop 'flexibility' to cope and to 'bounce'.

- When asked "What do you understand by the term 'resilience'?" roughly, a sixth of participants refer to the term 'emotions' within their analysis of their understanding of what resilience is. Analysis of this data, reveals two further sub themes; that of managing ones own emotions and that of managing the emotions of others.

- Overwhelmingly participants refer to the term 'emotional' with reference to an individualized act of managing their own emotional responses.

- Responses to the question asking practitioners to identify in which areas the concept of Resilience is being applied within [their] organisation continued to endorse the idea that Resilience is being applied to individual well-being and the capability to meet organisational expectations. A noticeable proportion of respondents could not specifically identify where and/or to what extent Resilience is linked to their practice whilst others signalled it was significantly associated with all aspects of their practice experience in children and family services.

- The question regarding the application of resilience also reveals how and to what extent the concept is being applied to direct work with children and family safeguarding, to a lesser extent in Fostering and adoption Work and with some mention of adult work in relation to mental health and safeguarding. Practice in this regard appears to be organised around building and strengthening the 'resilience' of individuals, their networks and relationships.

Conclusion

Whilst resilience has become a regulatory requirement within professional practice to support the retention of practitioners in the profession, this research suggests that its application in practice is not conducive to supporting practitioners, indeed to appears its application in practice is a structural site of 'soft' coercion, designed to yield specific desired behaviours in the workplace where individuals internalise 'problems in practice' as those of their own, which leads to stress and potential burn-out.

Resilience appears to embody the twin propositions of power (capabilities) and the exercise of leadership within the profession at both a structural and organisational level. The interdependence of these may be perceived as the current pre-requisites to an organisational eco system that provide un-healthy notions of 'resilience' to thrive.

This research suggests this is related to limited transparency, or alignment of intent, from government, regulators and educationalists on what resilience is, its purpose and how it should be applied within a practice setting for both professionals and those who require services.

From respondents comments it appears resilience is predominantly conceived of as a punitive mechanism, whether this is the result of soft coercion is unclear, however, practitioners responses suggest the current place and meaning of resilience in practice could be conceived of as a manipulative and unethical managerial tool.

Any understanding of the interplay between resilience and ethics appears under-developed. Whilst resilience is more commonly understood as a method of practice and a mode of professional capability, awareness of the application of resilience by employers from an ethical perspective appears absent and raises concerns for the authors in respect of the application of resilience with those who require services, who are also expected to demonstrate 'resilience'.

Recommendations

Our research illuminates how 'resilience' is constructed and communicated as an additional task for the individual social work manager/social worker/student/service user to engage with as part of the routine of daily life.

As such, 'resilience' is an individualised activity.

The focus of our recommendations is to extend a current understanding of 'resilience' as being located within and the responsibility of the individual to rather viewing resilience as a quality that is situated within relationships, communities, resources and policies to create sustainability, and stability, in the workforce and in the provision of services.

Thus 'resilience' is not borne by one but by all. We therefore recommend:

• We recommend the extension of the focus of this research from scrutinising the individual practitioner/ department/organisation in isolation to assist us to discover, and explore, the interconnections that impact upon developing an enabling healthy resilience eco system that promote sustainability within both the work force and service provision.

• As a matter of urgency, we recommend the development of a transparent understanding of the meaning of 'resilience'.

• This should not be a 'top-down' imposition by academics, professional bodies or policy makers but should be informed by the voice of the workers, students and service users whom are tasked to internalise 'resilience'.

• In the light of the oppressive day to day meanings of 'resilience' as reported by practitioners, we recommend further research is required to revise the current understanding of 'resilience' that informs our regulatory requirements and curricula.

• We recommend further research to question whether social work curricula encompasses teaching to assists students to recognise how an overly individualised focus can be oppressive to both worker and service user.

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