

The tyranny of Resilience

Social Workers Voices From the Frontline



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Executive Summary

The focus of our conclusions is to extend a current understanding of 'resilience' as being both located within and the responsibility of the individual to rather viewing resilience as a quality that is situated within relationships, communities, resources and policies.

Thus 'resilience' is not borne by one but by all, especially at a structural, organisational and political level.

This research suggests the current application of resilience, as both a capability and form of practice, is limited by a lack of ideological and theoretical 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. Understanding of the interplay between resilience and the psycho-socio-political-ideological and ethical realms appears under-developed.

From respondents comments it appears resilience is predominantly conceived of as a punitive mechanism. practitioners responses suggest the current place and meaning of resilience in practice could be conceived of as a manipulative and unethical managerial tool.

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

To support this the development of a contextualised and transparent understanding of the meaning of 'resilience' is required to assist practitioners and students to recognise how an overly individualised focus can be oppressive to both worker and service user.

This should not be a ‘top-down’ imposition by 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 light of the oppressive day to day meanings of ‘resilience’, as reported by practitioners, further research is require to revise the current understanding of ‘resilience’ that informs our regulatory requirements and social work curricula to develop, and encompass, teaching that resists neoliberalism’s

“anesthetisation of the mind” (Van Gorder, 2007: p9) and:
“culture of conformity” (Williams, 2016: p55).

Secondly, we suggest understanding of the place and meaning of resilience in professional practice needs to engage in a renewed **emphasis on sociological theory** and issues of power, to clearly define the wider purpose of social work as a social justice endeavour (McArthur, 2010). This research suggests the application of resilience in practice may represent structural sites of organisational and political oppression, designed to yield specific desired behaviours in the workplace where workers, and those who require services, are encouraged to internalise ‘problems in practice’ and ‘problems in living’ as those of their own making, rather than having a wider socio-politico-economic basis.

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 as an ideologically application of decontextualised resilience serves as a punitive, and coercive, mechanism for compliance.

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Introduction

Background to this Research

Anecdotal information shared with the authors by children and family social work practitioners suggested 'resilience' was being used by employers to focus on individuals' failures, rather than exploring the wider context of practice. Workers told the authors resilience was being used to divert attention away from failures in the system, caused by significant issues such as funding cuts and workforce instability as practitioners left the profession due to high levels of stress.

This prompted the authors to research the place and meaning of resilience in social work practice. Our aim was to discover practitioners experience of the place and meaning of resilience in social work practice.

Our 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

We developed an online survey to gather practitioners experiences via a 'think' piece published online by both The Guardian Social Care Network and Community Care. Over 500 practitioners responded and the research team undertook a discourse analysis of responses.

This report provides in-depth analysis of those responses to develop understanding of the place and meaning of resilience in social work practice.

Analysis and discussion

Resilience, ideology & positive psychology

Resilience is viewed as a specific capability for qualified social workers and as a positive asset to be developed by social work students pre qualification, however, the current place and meaning of resilience extends beyond professional capability. Adams et al (2019) broadens the contextual understanding of resilience through an exploration of the inter-relationship of positive psychological theory and neoliberal ideology.

Ideological context

The ideological context in which notions of resilience has developed in both social work education and practice in the UK has been dominated by a neoliberal approach over the last 30 years (Rogowski, 2018).

However, in the context of this discussion the authors suggest neoliberalism confers universal moral inviolability to the values of free choices and self-governance. As a mainstream ideology in advanced capitalist economies, neoliberalism prioritises economic growth and prescribes free market solutions to almost every social, political, or economic problem or crisis (Bettache and Chiu, 2019).

The impact of this on social work practice in the UK has arguably led to a gradual erosion of the traditional welfare state and a move toward what may be perceived as a more punitive approach, where social work has been transformed into a narrower, more restricted role focused on managerial tasks rather than relationship based practice (Rogowski, 2018). In earlier work Rogowski (2011) suggests social work has been turned into people processing, where practitioners are forced to adopt

managerial approaches to practice that are largely concerned with completing bureaucracy speedily to ration resources and assess/ manage risk. Changes in the organisational and ideological context of practice have been linked to greater 'burn out' across the profession (Munro, 2016), and this has increased the interest in the potential of resilience to address issues of recruitment and retention within the workforce, as well as the potential to develop resilience in those, social workers seek to support.

Positive psychological theory

The theoretical foundations to support the development of resilience as a capability are visible within positive psychological theory. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) pioneered the principles of positive psychology in their well-known article entitled 'Positive psychology: An introduction', in which Seligman summarised it as the scientific study of optimal human functioning that aims to discover and promote the actors that allow individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is defined by Kashdan and Ciarrochi (2013) as a scientific exploration of optimal functioning, which seeks to enable individuals to develop the necessary skills to improve their well-being. Positive psychology interventions (PPI) includes cognitive training and exercises primarily aimed at raising positive feelings, positive cognitions or positive behaviour as opposed to interventions aiming to reduce symptoms, problems or disorders (Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009), for example cognitive training using 'mindfulness'.

Resilience: an intersection of ideology and theory

The authors tentatively suggest respondents responses may reflect the intersection of neoliberal ideology with popular positive psychological theory. Resilience is thus a cultural form which influences patterns of behaviour in institutions, manifested in regulatory systems and practices. Adams et al (2019) suggests positive psychological

knowledge is imbued with neoliberal biases. Such biases are reflected in:

‘a radical abstraction of self from social and material context, with an understanding of self as an ongoing development project, an imperative for personal growth and fulfillment, and an emphasis on affect management for self-regulation.’(p2)

Respondents appear to provide some support for this assertion where their comments focus on framing resilience as an individual activity, where individual growth, and affective self-regulation is seen to optimise well-being (Adams et al, 2019). This may serve to de-contextualises the practice of social work and increases the spotlight on the individuals perceived ‘failings’ and the need for the individual to carry the weight of responsibility to ‘work’ on themselves to prevent such failure in the future.

An example of this may be found in research that supports the application of mindfulness as integral to developing resilience as a professional (Grant and Kinman, 2014;2018;2019.Roulston et al, 2018). While there is clearly a place for mindfulness, there also exists the potential for it to reinforce a culture of blame if located, uncritically, in the same ideological and theoretical framework that appears to legitimise the current application of resilience as both a professional requirement , and a mode of practice with service users.

As Purser (2019) suggests

“The so-called mindfulness revolution meekly accepts the dictates of the marketplace. Guided by a therapeutic ethos aimed at enhancing the mental and emotional resilience of individuals, it endorses neoliberal assumptions that everyone is free to choose their responses, manage negative emotions, and “flourish” through various modes of self-care. Framing what they offer in this way, most teachers of mindfulness rule out a curriculum that

critically engages with causes of suffering in the structures of power and economic systems of capitalist society.” (The Guardian, 2019)

Whilst this observation is aimed at the broader ‘mindfulness industry’ there is some evidence within this research which seems to suggest the application of an individualised concept of self care needs to be re-contextualised within wider ideological and theoretical perspectives because Tourish et al (2009) suggest

‘In such contexts, ideology serves as a source of conscious and permanent scrutiny, functioning as an invisible internal eye, which holds the behaviour of the subject to the ideology’s exacting standards and ensures that subjects themselves become the instruments through which their own subordination is exercised.’ (p373)

From this perspective it could be suggested regulatory requirements, capabilities and standards of proficiency in respect of ‘resilience’ are structural sites of ‘soft’ coercion, designed to yield specific desired behaviours in the workplace where individuals internalise dominant ideological norms as their own. As Townley (1993) suggests the exercise of power is not just associated with particular institutions, but also with the practices, techniques and procedures enforced by those institutions.

In this way, it could be suggested that respondents may have been ‘coercively persuaded’ by the deployment of techniques, such as regulatory requirements, that behaviours approved of by powerful organisational actors i.e. the professions regulator and their employer, become internalised, and are not challenged. This might be conceived of as a form of ‘thought reform’ (Lifton, 1989), which reduces the need for micro surveillance, since if people embrace a particular ideological and theoretical belief system, and the norms that are associated with it, these guide behaviour in a desired directions with minimal external

oversight (Tourish et al, 2009). Notions of resilience contributes to this through its stress on heightened self-awareness, reflexivity and individual responsibility. These particular traits all align with 'being professional'.

Adams et al (2019) suggests popular positive psychology reproduces and reinforces the authority of neo-liberalism leading to

“the reduction of sociocultural phenomena to the aggregated acts of inherently independent individuals’ (p12)

Going on to state

“... the neoliberal movement have shaped psychological experience and therefore the knowledge base of mainstream psychological science. Neoliberal systems build on and reinforce characteristic psychological tendencies of liberal individualism - including the radical abstraction of self from context’ (p2)

As a consequence of this resilience is pathologised, and intervention is sought at an individual level rather than addressing issues of structural and organisational oppression.

Another striking feature of participants responses ,which further supported the 'individualisation' of resilience in practice, was their perceived need to manage emotion. The inter-relationship between emotion and resilience is encapsulated in the notion of 'emotional intelligence'. Research suggests

“supporting the development of emotional intelligence and self determining behaviour may go some way to addressing the experiences of stress and burnout among social workers, and the retention of social workers in this profession” (Bunce et al, 2019: p20).

Whilst Biggart et al (2016) state

“emotional intelligence covers the ability to identify emotions in oneself and others and to manage emotions in oneself and others Research shows that Trait Emotional Intelligence helps reduce physiological responses to stress and is strongly associated with mental health” (p3-4)

However, it could be suggested uncritical acceptance of this strategy may exacerbate the current situation further. Again, as with resilience, this approach locates the ‘problem’ within the individual, and suggests emotional intelligence is something the individual must learn to improve their resilience, and ultimately their professionalism and wellbeing.

From an ideological perspective Binkley (2018) suggests in a neoliberal context ‘emotions are not diminished per se, but are re-conceived as resources and instruments for advancement’ (pp.581). In this context practitioners emotions are not crushed or suppressed they are re-made, produced and modified for the wider purposes of their organisation. If one lacks these:

‘qualities, one should set about the work of generating them through the use of a set of generally available lifestyle techniques (self-help, physical exercise, popular psychologies, etc. To neglect the development of one’s emotional life is a failure for which no one else is responsible. In other words, emotions are no longer simply experiences or static states, much less traces of deeper subjective characters and truths: they are dynamic, plastic resources’ (Binkley, 2018: p582).

It is this notion of ‘plasticity’ that was most apparent within respondents responses, a belief that they need to be ‘flexible’, able to ‘bounce,’ able to ‘bend’ to meet their professional requirements, to meet their organisational needs, to meet service users needs.

The neoliberal inter-sections between resilience, emotional intelligence, psychological theory and professionalism could be conceived as putting in place a set of internal restrictions on any use of professional power that might over-extend their use of knowledge to threaten that which it governs. From this perspective the individualisation of resilience provides a distraction to looking beyond the individual to deeper aspects of the political and structural. This was frequently apparent within respondents comments as the ideological, political and structural realms remained at a surface level confined to comments in respect of 'limited resources'.

Previous research by Joseph (2013) firmly locates resilience as a form of 'neoliberal governmentality' arguing that it has become a normative force, deflecting attention from formal structural analysis and emphasising individual responsibility for solutions to collective problems. Evans and Reid (2013) present this as a paradox inherent within the concept of resilience and expose how resilient individuals are destined to remain constantly vigilant to adapting and therefore have less capacity to envision how to change their circumstances.

In this context resilience can be conceptualised as a tool of control retaining subjects in a permanent state of anxiety and denying them agency to address the source of their woes.

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 it appears the notion of resilience is constructed as 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. The pursuit of individualised resilience potentially leaves intact any oppressive structural and organisational realities that exist in practice, leading to increased level of stress for the individual practitioner.

Ethics and the application of resilience in practice

Petsagourakis (2013) suggests all ethically orientated action is guided by two fundamental maxims, the ethics of conviction and/or the ethics of responsibility, the latter is clearly apparent in respondents' comments. In terms of the ethics of conviction Chandler (2013) may be accurate when arguing ethical conviction and responsibility 'seem much less tenable today as each is reformulated to take account of the fact that the consequences our actions are dependent upon the psycho-socio-material processes into which they are inserted' (p176).

However, if we reframe resilience as a socio-political-material process in this research, the notion of resilience appears to redistribute ethical conviction and individual responsibility in ways that rather than challenging existing power relations and inequalities appears to affirm and reify them.

Our research findings suggest the place and meaning of resilience in respondents practice settings appears devoid of an ethical relationship where resilience is re-articulated within a power hierarchy and the reification of managerialism and neo-liberal ideology (Chandler, 2013).

This has implications for its application with those who require social work services.

Conclusion

Our research suggests there is limited transparency from government, regulators, educationalists, employers, or within the PCF or SoPS, on what resilience is, and its purpose.

For participants in this research, resilience in practice is imbued with an ideological power they are unaware of, one which promotes self regulation of practitioners professional behaviour, and their reactions to a stressful work environment. Research by Bay (2019) assists in

trying to understand how this occurs, arguing neoliberalism constitutes a specific 'art of government'. Central to this 'art' is the notion that individuals are governed through – in Foucauldian terms – technologies of self-responsibilisation and the freedom to choose. It appears this is supported by theoretical propositions, from a positive psychology perspective, whereby a symbiotic relationship is formed as social work practitioners work on themselves to develop and maintain their resilience in practice.

The fusion of neoliberal ideology and psychological theory within the application of resilience presents a challenge, as it appears to provide a theoretical foundation for punitive practices. The absence of a clear sociological foundation in resilience has been to the detriment of practitioners. We therefore call for a refreshed and more nuanced understanding of resilience and the application of resilience in professional practice.

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