Building resilient practitioners:
constructing research out of practice

Dr Carole Adamson
University of Auckland
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c.adamson@auckland.ac.nz
Outline of webinar

• Resilience in social work
• Theoretical perspectives on resilience
• Why research resilience?
• Designing research on resilience
• Implementing the research
• Findings and future activity
Resilience in social work

i. Employer perspectives

ii. Workplace, employee and wellbeing perspectives

iii. Best practice – Competency, service user and quality perspectives
i. Employer perspectives

[Social work graduates need to demonstrate] ‘independent critical judgement’, alongside the facility to work in much more innovative ways, for example through ‘a fully developed capacity to take responsibility for the use of reflection and critical analysis’ and through the ability ‘to work creatively and effectively … in a context of risk, uncertainty, conflict and contradiction’.

GSCC, 2005:19–20

The employing environment (state, society and the employer) requires social workers to be robust and emotionally sophisticated
ii. Workplace, employee and wellbeing perspectives

Organisational implications:
recruitment, retention, sustainability of standards/knowledge transfer

Occupational health implications:
Morale, stress levels, burnout, workplace relationships
(Occupational Safety & Health Service, 2003)

Emotional resilience ‘has clear implications for individuals’ adaptive capacities under conditions of environmental stress, conflict or uncertainty’
(Klohen 1996:1068, in Collins, 2007:256)
iii. Best practice

Competency, service user and quality perspectives:

• focus on quality of service delivery and the consumer experience
• professional standards (e.g. ANZASW Code of Ethics; SWRB Code of Conduct and competency & registration requirements)

Link between resilience and competence is of course not lineal: lack of resilience may inhibit, erode or compromise competence, but resilience does not create competence
Theoretical perspectives on resilience

Resiliency theories strongly resonate with best practice in current social work, e.g. Strengths-based practice and a recovery focus; Tangata Whenua knowledge and practice, etc.

... theoretical emphasis has shifted from resilience as solely individual traits to notions of adaptation despite multiple and cumulative risks and to understanding protective factors for buffering or mediating effects of adversity.

Bottrell (2009:323)

Historical development

- Individually focused, psychologically based
- Ecological
- Narrative/Strengths
- Community development
Theoretical perspectives on resilience (2)

Personal, relational and environmental elements:

• Resilience is not just an individual trait but an adaptation and response to complexity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Ungar, 2004 & 2008).

• Environmental supports for resilience - commitment to examining underlying processes that affect vulnerability and protective factors (Bottrell, 2009).

• Emphasis on strengths as well as deficits – shift from pathogenic to salutogenic stance (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

• Resilience not a static concept – coping with adversity means dynamic planning for the unpredictable in social work.
Why research resilience?

• Significant research on service user resilience not yet matched by focus on ourselves
• Potential to strengthen arguments for supervision and other professional supports
• Opportunity to assist ongoing curriculum design for developing robust social work graduates, around use of self, reflection and mindfulness (etc)
Importance of qualitative research:

– People’s own experience and narratives
– Unpacking the personal, professional, relational and contextual complexities of resilience
– Hearing the voice of practitioners in health rather than other often dominant fields in workforce research
Implementing the research

- Literature review
- Research design and ethical approval
- Searching for participants through natural networks
- Mental health, physical health and social work student supervisors
- Semi-structured interviews (27)
- Self-defining of the concept of resilience
- Transcription and thematic data analysis
- Pulling it together as journal articles
- Using research findings
Findings and future activity

- Literature review and research findings both suggest a three part framework of self, context and mediating factors
- Linking feature is awareness and ability to reflect
- Clinical/practice focus of professionals – thinking about the ‘other’
- Importance of supervision as a space to reflect and process
- Resilience as a fluid & dynamic, contextually-dependent process - not a trait, maybe an outcome?
Supervision, reflection & resiliency theories

Effective supervision [...] can delay or mitigate the effects of detrimental factors and can contribute to positive outcomes for workers in social service organizations.

Mor Barak et al (2009:25)

Supervision as a mediating factor...

Supervision as a site for facilitating reflection for individual development within a relational space – e.g. managing emotions and uncertainty, kindling hope

Beddoe (2010)
“What holds me firm [is] client-centredness and transparency of practice ... buttressed by the strong connection that I have with social work values and my legitimacy in terms of the social structures around me. So in my job description, the organisation I work for, the legislation that has certain expectations of me, [these] orient me in terms of not only my professional identity but my personal one as well and it’s that strong sense of ethic ... [that allows me] to go home and feel like despite a lot of the messages I’ve received on that day, that on a cognitive level I can say ‘well, I’ve done a good job’.”

‘Chris’, Mental Health
References