What do you mean, I'm "resilient"?

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This viewpoint explores the concept of "resilience" and the divergent uses of this term by those experiencing adversity, and by those observing and responding to the adversity of others.

The following narrative emerged from a Facebook and subsequent email discussion that the authors shared concerning resilience in the face of disasters. Carole has an academic interest in social work's role in disasters while Luis can talk authoritatively from his first-hand experience of the Canterbury earthquakes in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2010–2011. We think our reflections about the use of the concept can be applied equally well to organisational change; to family and community adversity in the face of addiction; to poverty, mental health, and domestic violence; or to forced trans-national relocation. The rationale for joining forces in writing this viewpoint was to add our weight to the debate over what is meant when someone is called "resilient" and, by straddling both academic and personal knowledges, to bridge any perceived gap between the academy and others in the social work use of the resilience concept.

Our shared position is that the resilience experienced by a person experiencing adversity such as the impact and aftermath of a disaster has a personal and unique meaning that inevitably undergoes a process of translation when external systems and structures are engaged, and that an uncritical use of the term can result in its use for political agendas contrary to social work values. This uncritical interpretation of resilience, strengths, vulnerabilities and needs by others runs the risk of contributing, in Paul Michael Garrett's words, to "the solidifying of the neo-liberal hegemonic order" (Garrett, 2016, p. 1912), whereby a seemingly common-sense set of assumptions about resilience and what people need will prescribe and delineate particular interventions (perhaps individualising need), and may under-emphasise the validity of other strategies that have a wider, social justice focus.

This viewpoint began its life in one of those late-night exchanges on Facebook. We had never met in person (and still have not) but we were both reacting, from our different social work perspectives, to an uncritical application of the resilience term to human experience and to social work activity. Luis' original posting had been that, in his personal experience, calling someone resilient felt like an act of oppression, a focus on personal rather than community adversity and recovery. We started an email discussion about how we as social workers should unpack, challenge and reclaim what we mean by resilience so as to resist its capture by forces that individualise the concept and minimise human rights and the need for social change. We decided to develop our musings further by combining our academic and experiential viewpoints into a critical commentary on the concept of resilience.

We begin with Luis' emailed observation that:

> Resilience is such an easy word to say and over-used by people who have never experienced a large earthquake. The moment they strike, your world is never the same. When I hear the media or people say that "Cantabrians are so resilient" or "Kiwis, what a resilient bunch", I just think, thank you for making me feel like a failure because I do not feel resilient, I do not feel I have the ability to bounce back and I do not feel that I have recovered to pre-September

2010, when the world was "whole". From the 4th of September 2010 to January 2013 there have been 11,000 tremors in Christchurch, I stopped monitoring the numbers a long time ago. Every earthquake and aftershock chips away at your foundations.

Carole's initial response was that the concept of resilience is both fluid and evolving: the works of Bottrell (2009), and Ungar (2004, 2008), for instance, chart its evolution from the 1970s' and 1980s' individualised personality descriptions of people able to bounce back from adversity, to a more systems-informed, nuanced and post-modern recognition that there are multiple predictors of positive outcome and so many different processes that will shape any recovery (Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2011; Norris, Tracy, & Galea, 2009). We know from disaster research, for instance, that recovery two days after a major 'quake looks a whole lot different than it does six years later (Adamson, 2014; Gibbs et al., 2013) and yet, as Luis forcefully reminds us, assessment of someone's resilience after disaster is not something made visible by models of recovery, but by the unique circumstances and meaning of those engaged in it. The experts here are the people who have experienced the disaster, and who need to retain ownership of how resilient they actually feel:

> The moment earthquakes strike, your world is never the same. As a parent my main role is to protect my children, to keep them safe from all harm and give them the best fighting chance to live a long and fruitful life, but when the monster hits – as it has all too frequently—the thought that you can protect your children disappears. There is absolutely nothing you can do to stop the earth shaking and at that point my children and I totally understand that "all bets are off", I will do my best but there is nothing Dad can do to stop this. I am no longer superman to my children, the role of protector now has caveats. Caveats that expose the reality of what is happening, you are no longer fully in control.

This was a salutary reminder for Carole that, sometimes, things just *are* overwhelming, and that the day-to-day reality of living a resilient life can be turbulent, incredibly nuanced and resistant to any absolute assessment of a person's level of coping. In a moment of social media serendipity linking earthquakes (the Kaikoura earthquake in Aotearoa New Zealand had just struck) and Trump's presidential victory in the United States, Aotearoa New Zealand cartoonist Toby Morris highlighted for us, on the same day as our conversation began, both the vulnerabilities, small acts of defiance and life-affirming actions that contribute to our understanding of resilience and vulnerability (http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/on-the-inside/318251/helplessness-and-hope-in-the-face-of-impossible-forces). Luis reflected on the expectation that "bouncing back" after disaster is what you do, and that being called resilient somehow prevents acknowledgement of vulnerability:

> But don't ever admit it, you need to stay strong and staunch, do not show any sign of weakness. You quickly learn to build layers between you and the outside world to hide behind, by the end of it you are not quite sure what the original person looked like. No crying and no panic attacks, never mind the constant tension you feel inside. Remember, this is the country that produces the almighty All Blacks.

He then reflected that assumptions of resilience—labelling someone as a survivor—are sometimes constructed by others as explanations for not intervening, for assuming a hands-off non-involvement by the state, for not supporting policies and providing resources that will mitigate the impact of disasters, be they seismological or social. Luis reflected on the long-term impact of the earthquakes:

> But if you look closely enough at society you can see the very fabric of it fraying, the relationship breakdowns, the short temperedness, the increase in mental

health cases, the domestic abuse, the alcohol and drug abuse and the increase in children having troubles at school.

He asks:

How then do you make sense of the Government's funding cuts to mental health services? If the Government is cutting funding to the very sector that can help then I must be making it up. "There must be fewer people in Christchurch being affected, there are obviously others who are needier than I am, harden up, be more resilient, do not show any signs of weakness. There are others more deserving of those precious resources."

Our conversation reaffirmed for us (personally and academically) that the experience of resilience is not just about impact and recovery, but that, over time, it becomes about how well we are equipped—or how our communities equip us—with the means of recovery. A challenge to ourselves and our colleagues is, as Diprose (2015) suggests, to be aware of/sensitive to the degree to which an uncritical adoption of the term resilience implies resignation to draining conditions, resignation to disadvantage rather than resistance to inequities. An over-emphasis, assumption of, and reliance on, individual strengths may overshadow the social and structural inequalities that initiate and perpetuate the experience of stress (Bottrell, 2009; Garrett, 2016; Thoits, 2010). Our gut feeling from our own email exchange reinforces current social work perspectives on the resilience concept: that a focus on strengths and resilience by policy makers and funders of services can detach us from an analysis of social inequality and the fundamental causes of those disparities. Garrett (2016) further reminds us, as Luis observed, that notions of resilience can be normative and value-laden, reinforcing (for example) the Aotearoa New Zealand sense of pride in self-sufficiency and number 8 wire whilst de-emphasising the erosion of resilience through poverty and other intersections of health, gender, culture and disability.

So what is our social work comprehension of resilience and how can we turn this into an act of resistance? We know the global definition of social work provides us with a dual mandate to focus on the wellbeing of individuals, whānau and communities with whom we engage, and to address social and economic inequities at systemic and structural levels (International Federation of Social Workers/International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014). As social workers, we have a commitment to promote prevention and early intervention, to not always be working in crisis mode (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2007). We understand, for instance, the social determinants of health, and the challenges to a holistic comprehension of wellbeing from expedient alliances between scientific thinking and political agendas (Beddoe & Joy, 2017; Healy, 2015). Our bi-focal lens enables us to embrace research literature from social work and allied disciplines that re-balance a focus from "just" trauma and individual coping, towards an appreciation of complex, intersecting influences that include the causes of the adversities as well as their impact (Bonanno et al., 2011; Bottrell, 2009; Diprose, 2015).

Aotearoa New Zealand social work research points to resilience formed out of a multiplicity of individual, relational *and* contextual factors that contribute to an outcome not solely dependent on gumption and personal characteristics. From research with experienced social workers and practice learning supervisors (Adamson, Beddoe, & Davys, 2012), a matrix of factors contributing to our own practitioner resilience was identified, reinforcing international research that, in order to define and work with a robust understanding of resilience, it is important to recognise the interaction of factors within our environment: it is as much about power at community and national levels as it is about individual strengths and vulnerabilities. The Canterbury earthquakes also yielded evidence that strengthens arguments for community and cultural

understandings of resilience (Dionesio & Pawson, 2016; Rawson, 2016; Thornley, Ball, Signal, Lawson-Te Aho, & Rawson, 2015).

In our view, therefore, a social work understanding of resilience is underpinned by our professional values and commitment to a just society, informed by both honouring individual narratives and by wise application of academic research. Any working social work definition of resilience requires a dual focus of honouring individual experience and of addressing systemic and structural factors that create and perpetuate vulnerability.

Our viewpoint here concludes with our call to think twice when using resilience to describe the experience of people responding to stressors, be they seismic, political, interpersonal, social or cultural. Resilience, as Luis suggests, is not something to be read entirely from outside of a person's own experience or context. Nor is it, as Garrett (2016) argues, a term that should be used uncritically in political agendas that seek to minimise structural disadvantage. Our acknowledgement here of both personal experience and solid research suggests that it is not a "one size fits all" term, nor a condition that, once achieved, endures for ever. If, as Diprose (2015) suggests, we view resilience as potentially a reactive term which (unlike Luis' voice of personal experience) ignores indignation, frustration and rage, we leave the burden of risk on those experiencing the disadvantage and ignore the opportunity to turn surviving into thriving. Furthermore, using the term unadvisedly can, in our view, perpetuate the agendas of those for whom the word resilience is actually a weapon of silencing and oppression.

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