

# SUSTAINING RESILIENT WORKERS IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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# The Research Team

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# Introduction- research in the context of...

The problematic: Child protection social work an international reality and sickness/attrition rates of much concern in e.g. Canada, Australia, UK, Sweden and Italy.

Hugely wasteful in terms of educational/organisational resources, individual hopes and dreams, and detrimental to service users

The team: Ongoing collaboration between Italy, Sweden and the UK,

Previous project on 'readiness to practice' which opened up further questions

Individual and compatible strengths and interests of the research team

Support: EASSW project funding to develop the area

# Today's presentation

- Previous research and theory: resilience theory and a working model of resilience;
- Findings: 5 areas that influence peoples willingness to remain in child protection: their perception of the nature of the task; organisational issues, supervision, personal and relational resilience and social work education.
- Some conclusions and questions.

# Previous research (1)

- A substantial body of research on the difficulties for social workers involved in child protection. A range of papers present high turn over rates all over the world (Norway as an exception? Healey & Oltedal 2012) The research tends to focus on:
  - Trauma (secondary traumatic experiences)
  - Burnout (more some years ago, but still a lot)
  - Resilience (a systematic review finds 69 articles relevant on resilience in child protection workers(Collins,2008 ).
  - Friends, peer-groups, support, inclusion (Borak et al, 2006)
  - Most articles focus on “why are they leaving?” not “why are they staying?”

## Previous research (2)

- Some studies on people who stay in difficult situations. They are however often focused on the individual (how individuals can endure and even like working despite high stress levels), ignoring organizational levels. However there are a number of discursive articles that offer a more contextual analysis, and propose remedial action, e.g. :
  - More supervision
  - Support for reflective practice and peer support
  - Discuss what social work education can do.

However there seems to be a need to focus on different aspects of social work resilience: individual, organizational and educational. (The purpose this study).

# Models of resilience (1)

- Horwitz (2006;1998) uses to Rutter's theory of resilience in childhood to apply to supporting professional resilience in 4 ways:
- Risk reduction (trying to avoid exposure to traumatizing events)
- Avoid negative chain reactions (often the handling of the events that can cause more trauma)
- Development of self-esteem (“task accomplishment in the context of loving interpersonal relationships”)
- Openness to life opportunities

## Models of resilience (2)

### Stefan Venistendael and Jaques Lecomte: the 'casita' model of resilience

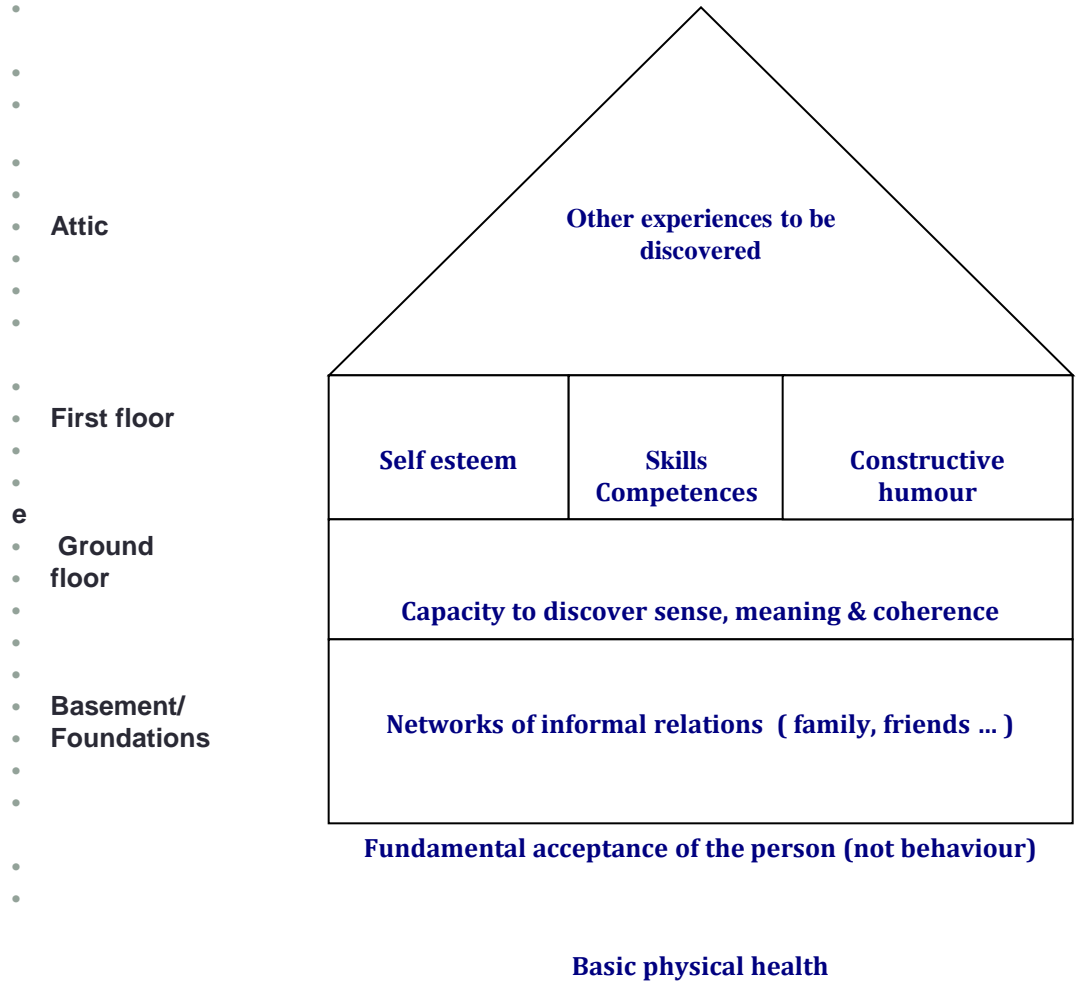
Venistendael (2003) argues resilience:

- Is never absolute
- Is variable in time and space
- 2 dimensions – resistance and construction, to do the latter involves imaging the future
- In certain cases the capacity to transform negative events for some elements of growth. Growth will sometimes happen in spite of problems, sometimes because of them and sometimes be a mixture'
- Is built in a [lasting] relationship between an individual/group and its surroundings/environment
- Links to ethical principles - what is 'positive adaptation', what does it mean 'to adapt' to repressive regimes or difficulties?



# The casita model

Casita: Resilience Building



# The Casita model, cont.

This offers a notion of relationships, networks, connections etc. at the foundational level,

It recognises the need for making sense and making meaning: perhaps being creative, feeling what you do is worthwhile, some chance of humour, of self-esteem and recognition, and some spaces to develop into.

It does not recognise/name how these things can be supported and developed: organisationally, through supervision, connections and education ?– as we now go on to do

# Methodology used

- Semi-structured hermeneutic interviews, group and individual. Accessed perceptions of core issues of resilience in child protection sw practice
- Personal and professional background
  - Motivations
  - Perception on drop-out
  - Role of organizations, education, other factors
- Transcripts analysis and categorization

## People interviewed (Nov. '12 – Feb. '13)

	sw	Sw man ager s	Sw educ ator s	Tot.
Italy	12	4	5	21
Sweden	6	3	6	15
UK	9	3	6	18
Tot.	27	10	17	54

# The social work task itself (1)

- **The mission – protecting and supporting families and children**
  - - I love this job
  - - this is my passion
  - - not for everyone
  - - feel responsible for the next generation
- **The power dimension of the job**
  - - you can make a change in peoples' lives
  - - perhaps not change the world, but matter to individuals

# The task itself (2)

- **The variation of task**
- - this job is never boring,
- - no day is the same
- - never know what to expect
- - includes talking to people, analysing, writing, playing with children, shopping with mothers

# Organisational issues (1)

- **The working structure as such**
- - an understandable structure for how cases are handled
- -not too many cases
- - an organized daily work situation
- - to have resources for the families
- - reasonable salary
- -not working alone in difficult cases

# Organisational issues (2)

- **The importance of the team manager**
  - - someone in charge
  - - cover your back
  - - who prioritizes the safety of children and staff
  - - gives you recognition
  - - knows all the cases / vs / not too involved

# Organisational issues (3)

- **The team itself**
- - 'we have a good mode'
- - trust each other
- - colleagues help with difficult assessments
- - senior practitioners who take responsibility
- - also having fun together



# Organisational issues (4)

- **Creating room for supervision and reflection**
- - formal supervision on cases
- - external supervision on feelings and relations
- - Informal spaces and opportunities

# Supervision

## High value placed on

**Internal** It is like a holy cow, ... well I think it is important, and I think every social service here in Sweden have it every other week... And you cant take that away. (Manager G).

**External/** I think it is good that we have this supervision from external supervision that we can use for the cases and also for the group to talk when we feel like we need it. (L.)

**Individual** I valued one to one supervision. I found that the most helpful (UK)

**Group**The supervision internal we do in a group. In our cases, we do it with our boss, it takes some time, but I think it is really good, because we know each others clients, and we also know how to deal with different things the next time they happen. (G.)

# Supervision, cont

- **Self-generated:**
- The exchange between us is important when you can do it. They aren't structured and formal space. They are informal but they are not sufficient. We have created a group that meets once a week. We can talk between us but it's changed now. (Mi)
- Another thing I wanted was supervision. But it was impossible. At that time there were some possibilities, there was some money, but my colleagues did not want because they considered it as a control, even if it was not. (Ca)
- We talk between us, we have a continuous dialogue between us.
- We support ourselves. (Ca) We supervise between us: colleagues.

# Friendship and connections:

## ‘ Recognition’ (e.g Honneth )

- Eng –”Why I think I’m still here today is that kind of feeling of support ...peer to peer stuff...people having an awareness of you or kind of having recognition of what work you are doing and where you are at emotionally.”

## Support

- It -The work group is crucial –’peers’ ‘friends’ for support and supervision- usually the only resource. “the exchange between us is important when you can do it. They aren’t structured and formal spaces. They are informal but they are not sufficient”.

# Friendship and connections (2)

## **Humour and emotional 'lift'**

- SW “If you are a strong team and support each other and that you can have humour and lift each other up emotionally it makes all the difference”

## **Strength/resilience**

- Sw –” ‘One thing to get a bigger resilience is that the group is a joint unit that makes the individual social worker feel strong: ‘I am not alone in this I am part of a team we are doing this together’

## **Friendship**

- UK “The friends I have now are the friends I had from work...”

# Social work education

- **Social Work education**
- What do you think could be done on educational level to make people more resilient?” “Maybe to get more prepared. (...) Maybe how to handle stress. I think more practical tips or ways to how do you do when you feel like this where you go. How do you try to get yourself on a normal level”
- “Because I had a picture of what working at a social office was but it didn’t, it wasn’t true when I go to see what social worker does. So I changed my mind when I got my field work”

# Social work education

- **Continuing/additional training**
  - important (reinvigorating), but not enough
  - limits and obstacles (it helps but does not solve all the problems)
- The [team] with a high turnover did not get any education in order to improve their work, not even supervision. In the [low turnover] other they got a lot of education, could attend courses, and was supervised. And they were very proud about their work, where as the others said they did lots of mistake. )

# Conclusions...

Resilience in social work is a complex amalgamation of:

- Personal- hopes and dreams, esteem and worth, satisfaction, power, passion, politics
- Professional- a sense of professional identity fit, capacity to be creative and recognised, pride
- Organisational – support, supervision, structure, work load, influence, etc.



# Conclusion

- Educational – for use of self, expectations as well as knowledge of/ in social work; courses and further education
- Relational – informal networks, friends, peers, professional networks

- (refs on request)

**Question – how will  
austerity impact on this?**