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Retention, Recognition and Developing Resilience in Social Workers

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The presentation...

- ▶ Retention: the context and some current issues
 - ▶ Resilience: knowledge, models and research
 - ▶ Recognition and shame: a framework for management (and social work) practice
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Retention

- ▶ In England in the last 5 years, 60 per cent of children's social work services and 28 per cent of adult care services having retention difficulties. (1)
- ▶ Around 50% of child protection workers in UK and mainland Europe, and further afield, leave their jobs after 2 years.
- ▶ Causes seem to be: burnout, low salaries, organizational conditions, work stressors, occasionally threats, and the low status of the profession. (2)

Why does it matter?

- ▶ Important for social workers, social service providers, for society as a whole, since the work addresses the lives of vulnerable citizens.
 - ▶ Waste of hopes and dreams, money, education, training, experience and knowledge.
 - ▶ From the perspective of service users, there is a strong case for consistent and enduring relationships with a known worker enhancing the quality of the work. (3)
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Leaving can be understood as

- ▶ Rational decision making: e.g. cost benefit analysis: is there a better/better paid alternative?
 - ▶ Psychological factors such as expectations, commitment, personality, stress.
 - ▶ External factors e.g. location, family, further life choices.
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- ▶ The research literature suggests low organizational and professional commitment together with stress and lack of social support are the strongest predictors of turnover or social workers' intentions to leave. (4)
 - ▶ Individual differences and organizational factors are the likely scenario – so no one strategy for helping people to stay but a multiple approach.
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Knowledge base

There is a great deal on the difficulties for social workers involved in child protection. High turnover rates all over the world.

The research tends to focus on:

- ▶ Trauma (secondary traumatic experiences).
- ▶ Burnout (less popular perspective now).
- ▶ Resilience (a systematic review finds 69 articles relevant on resilience in child protection workers. (5)
- ▶ Most articles focus on “why are they leaving?” not “why are they staying?”

Resilience

- ▶ ‘Strength's perspective? Why do people stay’
- ▶ Thriving in settings; developing in your surroundings/context – can be framed as an issue of resilience: the question becomes ‘how can resilience be supported in social workers?’

Resilience thinking for social work

- ▶ Rather a buzz-word temporarily?
- ▶ Offers a wide cross-disciplinary approach to 'enduring'. Simply traits based approaches rarely used now. (6)
- ▶ Can unravel coping at an individual *and* a collective level.
- ▶ Thinking only about individual capacities can be convenient and blame-making, leading to individual workers being stereotyped as 'not coping'. (7)

Models for developing professional resilience: A (based on Rutter's work)

- ▶ 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 interpersonal relationships').
 - ▶ Encouraging openness to opportunities (8)
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Casita (cont)

- ▶ Is never absolute and 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? (9)

Some research...

Bristol, Milan, Calabria, Gothenburg, Lund:
2013.

‘Why do they stay?’

Child protection social workers who had been
in post between 3 and 40 years.

In depth interviews with app. 60 workers.

Research findings: The social work task itself

The mission – protecting and supporting families and children

The power dimension of the job

The variation of task

- ▶ you can make a change in peoples' lives
- ▶ perhaps not change the world, but matter to individuals

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
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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
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Organisational issues (3)

Creating room for supervision and reflection

- ▶ formal supervision on cases
- ▶ external supervision on feelings and relations
- ▶ informal spaces and opportunities

Relational and organisational issues

The team itself

- ▶ trust
 - ▶ colleague help with difficult assessments
 - ▶ senior practitioners who take responsibility
 - ▶ also having fun together
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Social work training/education

- ▶ Qualifying
- ▶ Continuing education/additional training

Team, friendship and connections:

- ▶ Recognition' (e.g. Honneth-later)
 - ▶ Support
 - ▶ Humour and emotional 'lift'
 - ▶ Strength/resilience
 - ▶ Friendship
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Supervision

- ▶ High value placed on this accross the board
 - ▶ Internal and External
 - ▶ Individual
 - ▶ Group
 - ▶ Self-generated
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Overall we found resilience (lasting) in social work to be ...

- ▶ A complex amalgam of organisational, relational and individual factors...
- ▶ Organisational: support, supervision, work load, structure, recognition, influence, autonomy, spaces for creativity, pride.
- ▶ Personal: a sense of identity fit, pride, hopes and dreams, esteem and worth, commitment and expectations.
- ▶ Educational: preparing, refreshing, spaces for thinking, esteem, knowledge.
- ▶ Relational: informal networks, friends, peers, trust, professional networks.

Returning to what people need to be able to stay...

- ▶ All of the above.
- ▶ A further systematic review found inconsistent evidence about individual factors, but...
- ▶ Organisationally: ‘on-the-job training and career progression, supervision and support, and a worker's sense of autonomy’.
- ▶ Supervision and support are major factors.
- ▶ ‘Administrative variables include salaries, specific job stressors such as high workloads, paperwork and recording systems, role conflict and the public perception of the work’. (10)

And....

Recognition: Axel Honneth–

German philosopher and social scientist argues humans need recognition from others to sustain resilience/ well-being /‘ok-ness’. (11)

Concept being applied to working with service users and also for workers. (12) (13) (14)

Loosely:

Self confidence, self-respect, self esteem.

Recognition

H1: Receiving appropriate care and love – the fundamental level from which other forms of recognition stem; its absence is highly significant.

H2: Gaining self-respect, e.g. in relation to the state (rights)

H3: Self-esteem: recognition of the individual's qualities amongst their 'communities of value'. Esteem is linked to the person's esteem within the group and the value of the 'group' to the society as a whole. 'Communities of value': helpful for thinking about work, and what work based friendships might be able to provide.

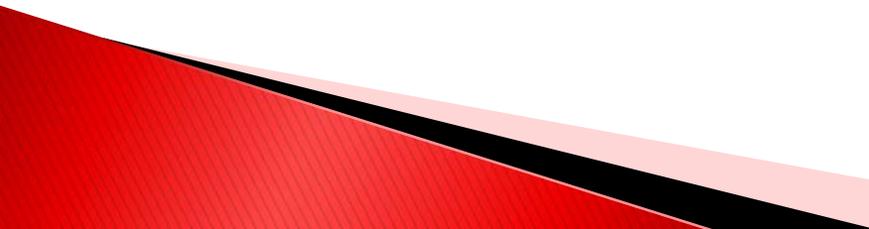
Misrecognition: Nancy Fraser

- ▶ *‘ To be misrecognized, in my view, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down on, or devalued in others conscious attitudes or mental beliefs. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life –not as a consequence of distributive inequality (such as failing to receive one’s fair share of resources or “primary goods”) but rather as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem. When such patterns of disrespect and disesteem are institutionalized– for example in law, social welfare, medicine, and/or popular culture– they impede parity of participation, just as surely as do distributive inequalities’ (2013, 176–7)*
‘...misrecognition is an institutionalized social relation, not a psychological state. In essence [it is] a status injury...’ (2013, 177)

Misrecognition and shame

- ▶ In Fraser's work on misrecognition, shame seems to be the all too likely outcome, and a fundamental experience for many social work service users.
- ▶ In England –perhaps more broadly– even simply that you are having contact with a social worker is a source of shame– let alone the nature of the relational, identity or social structural struggles that may have driven (the need for) that engagement
- ▶ For service users in multiple ways, but also for social work practitioners (e.g. Walker, 2011; Gibson, 2014)

Commonalties and transferable ideas

- ▶ Many of the fundamental features of shame and recognition can be understood as potentially affecting social workers– any workers perhaps– as well as service users.
 - ▶ Speaking about social workers and service users together makes sense:
 - ▶ Profound differences in relation to power, resources, life possibilities etc.,
 - ▶ But the capacity to identify and speak of their shame, and to be recognised, is problematic for everyone.
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Shame, misrecognition and 'voice'

- ▶ Shame impacts on social being, by separating individuals from each other and silencing them through fear of denigration and degradation. Shame is an isolating experience (Nussbaum 2004).
- ▶ Being able to express shame (helping people express shame) is fundamental. 'The very fact of communication can bring about particular closeness with other persons' (Lynd p. 66).
- ▶ Workers need to do their own 'shame resilience work' before they can identify that of others' and approach it, through reflection and supervision

Social work shame and misrecognition

- ▶ The current denigration of social work in England, is a text–book example of ‘misrecognition’.
- ▶ The media circulates version of social workers as undeserving of respect, mirroring what is said about the service users with whom they work. Individual workers may be vilified. The profession is regularly slated (Jones 2014).
- ▶ Ideas of ‘inter–professional decision making’ may be wishful thinking.
- ▶ Issues such as not being able to bring about much positive, or prevent much negative, change, may be experienced as failure and therefore accrue shame (Gibson 2014).

Recognition at work using Honneth

- ▶ H1 – Who offers caring and affection? The social work research cohort mentioned friendships as sustaining them at work, but that ‘management don’t give a toss about them’.
- ▶ H2 – Research on resilience often identifies inclusion in decision making, having a voice into organisational issues, feeling that you have some power in the workplace, as important.
- ▶ H3 – Having ones actual work recognised – a chance to contribute ones own expertise, special skills and knowledge and have them valued by a community of value? (colleagues – inter – professional workers, etc.) Being praised for doing a good job – being rewarded for good outcomes.

Conclusions

So then how might we look after our social workers?

How might we help them to stay? All of the above.

Not just a mindfulness course or a stress-busting session! Resilience is not just in your head, it is organisational, relational (and in your head!).

Recognising the complex multi-stranded nature of human resilience and well-being and the contributions made by the organisation and the people within it.

Most people come into this work enthusiastic, committed, creative, resourceful- they start from a good basis of wanting to work well and for more than 2 years. How hard can it be to help them????

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