Building resilient practitioners: constructing research out of practice

Dr Carole Adamson
University of Auckland
May 2014

c.adamson@auckland.ac.nz

Ko Ingarangi raua ko Ranana nga turangawaewae
England and London are the places I come from
Ko Huia, Tamaki Makarau toku kainga
Huia in Auckland is my home
Ko Ronald Adamson toku matua tane
Ron Adamson is my father
Ko Joan Cowdrey toku whaea
Joan Cowdrey is my mother
Ko Katharine raua ko Jessica aku tamahine
My daughters are Katharine and Jessica

Ko Auckland toku whare wananga
Auckland is my university
Ko social work toku mahi
I am a social worker
Ko Carole Adamson ahau
My name is Carole Adamson

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa
Greetings, everyone

Why introduce myself like that?

- I'm a New Zealander – sometimes we do it like that

- It recognises tangata whenua (people who belong to the land) and locates me *in relationship* with them

- It introduces a sense of an indigenous (non-Western) perspective into what I am talking about

- Māori perspectives take relationship and context (time and place) into consideration in all things, which is the gist of what I want to say here

So, some context: Introducing the team

Carole: I used to work in Brighton (nearly 30 years ago!)

Liz and Allyson: social workers, researchers and writers, resilience and supervision

And this is my family now

And this is where I live…

Outline of session

- Resilience in social workers

- Resilience - a contested concept in social work

- Theoretical perspectives on resilience

- Why research resilience?

- Designing research on resilience

- Doing the research

- Findings and future activity

Why a focus on resilience in social workers?

Social work education – contested priorities (Narey, Croisdale-Appleby, CSW/PCF/HCPC etc., etc.)

Basic premise here – the airline principle – efficient, effective workforce, etc.

Significant research on service user resilience not yet as matched by focus on workers

Potential to strengthen arguments for supervision and other professional, systemic supports

Opportunity to assist on-going curriculum design around developing robust fit-for-purpose social work graduates (my job)

Resilience in social workers: everybody wants to have a say

i. Employer perspectives

ii. Workplace, employee and wellbeing perspectives

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

1. 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

2. Workplace, employee and wellbeing perspectives

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

Occupational health implications:
Morale, stress levels, burnout, workplace relationships
(EWCO, 2005; 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)

3. Best practice

Competency, service user and quality perspectives:

- focus on quality of service delivery and the consumer experience
- professional capability standards (e.g. Codes of Ethics; Codes of Conduct, UK College of Social Work capability framework, 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.

Resilience is a contested concept

It's a term that can be over-used and misappropriated: it is open to capture by ideological agendas that justify action or sometimes, inaction

I've said a similar thing about the use of supervision…

Adamson (2011)

532 Frenchmen St · 10PM

Stop calling me

RESILIENT

Because every time you say,
"Oh, they're resilient,"
that means you can
do something else to me.

I am not resilient.

Tracie L. Washington · Louisiana Justice Institute

New Orleans: candychang.com

So what does the theory say about resilience?

We can see a shift in emphasis in resilience theories over time, picking up new opportunities for support and intervention approaches as the concept develops:

Individually focused, psychologically based

Ecological

Narrative/Strengths

Community development

Individual factors - e.g. temperament and wellbeing – cognitive behavioural interventions?

Relationships within families – e.g. attachment and parenting styles

Ecological perspectives - the interactions between the individual and their social environment – e.g. mental health problems tend to coexist with low income, social disadvantage and low social support

Role of culture – e.g. impact of colonisation, values, attitudes and beliefs about coping, locus of control, fate etc

Theoretical perspectives on resilience

Resilience theories strongly resonate with best practice in current social work, e.g. Strengths-based practice and a recovery focus

… 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.

Dorothy Bottrell (2009:323)

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 the workplace.
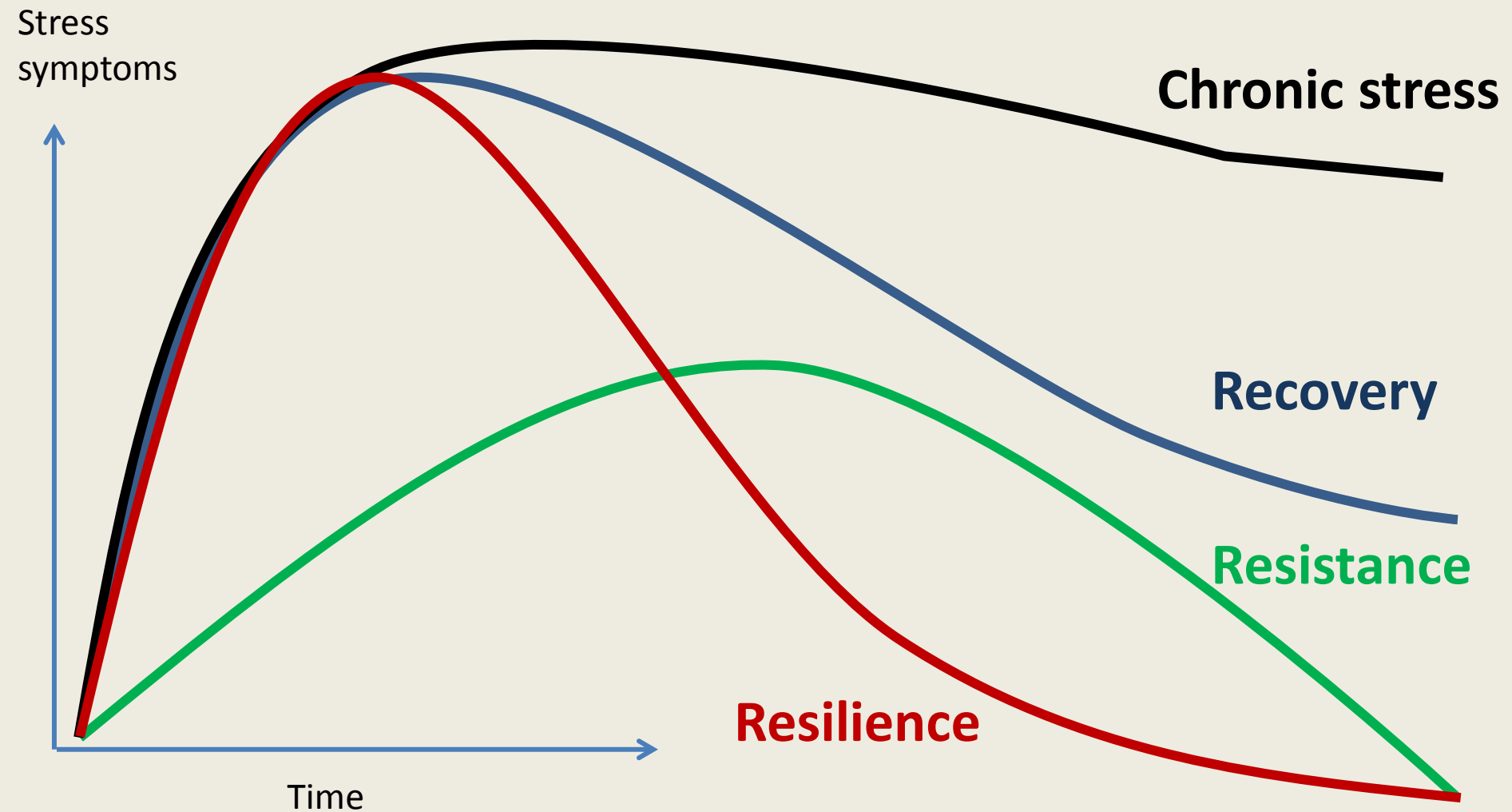
From stress research: bi-directional influences

Thoits (2010)

Physiological outcomes

Mediation of personal & social supports

Social outcomes
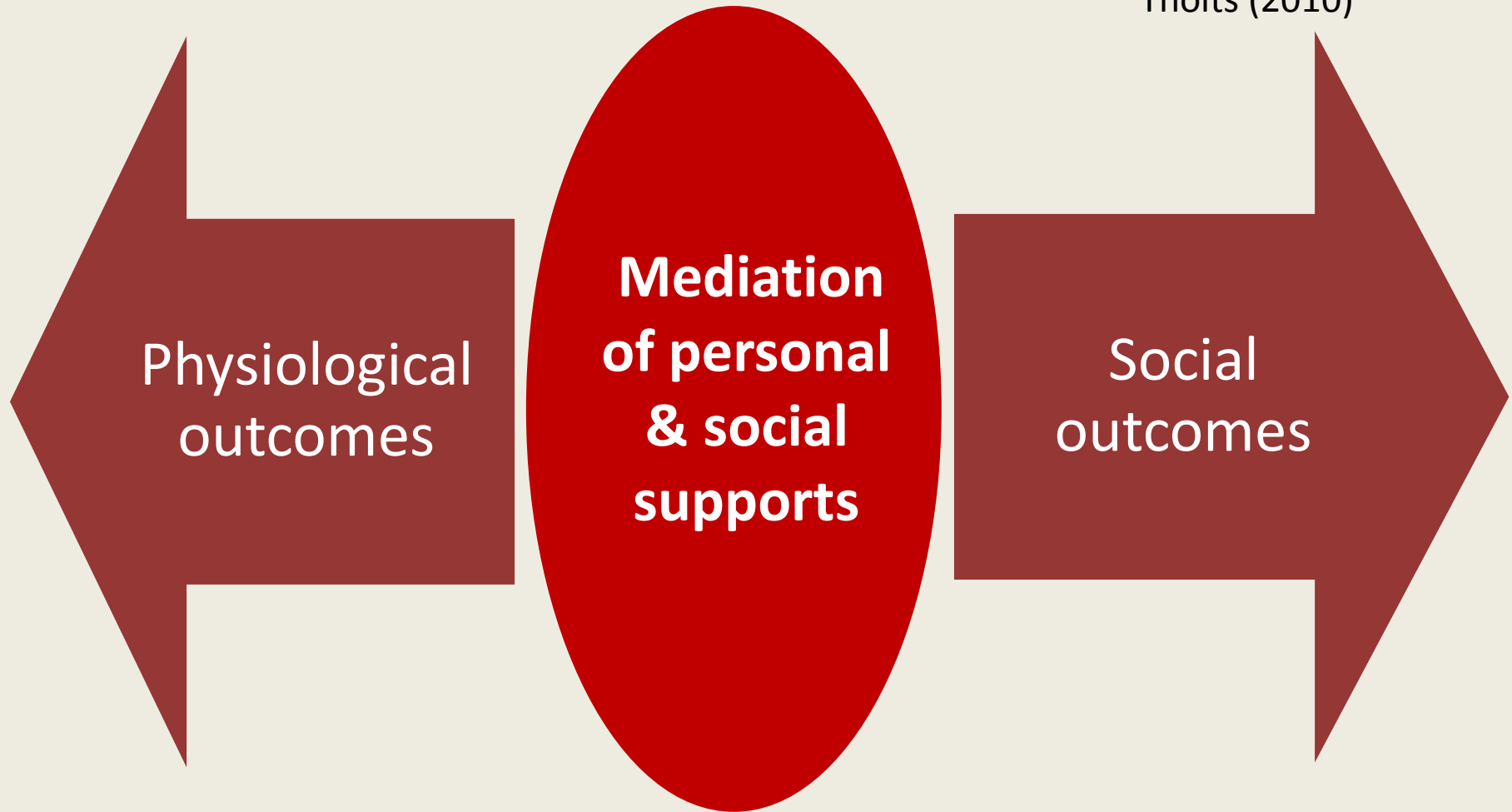
Mind & body ←→Cognitive functions ←→ Behaviour←→Social Interactions

From stress and disaster theory: resilience, resistance, recovery and chronic stress: different trajectories

Designing research on resilience with this knowledge in mind

Rationale for qualitative research:

- People's own experience and narratives
- Unpacking the personal, professional, relational and contextual complexities of resilience
- Hearing the voice of practitioners rather than other often dominant groups in workforce research

Doing 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

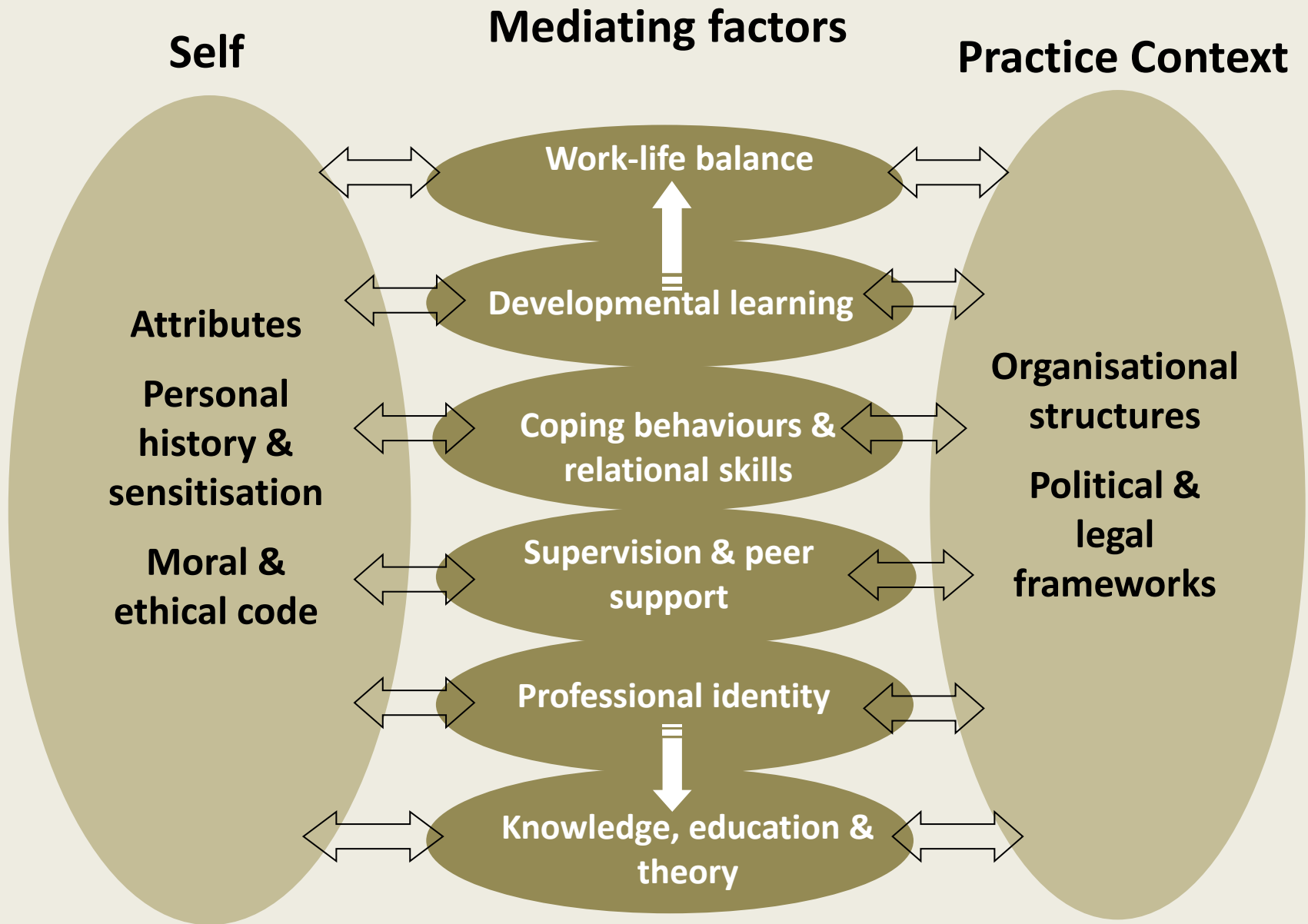- Pulling it together as journal articles

- Using research findings

- 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

Resilience in the Workplace

Self

Mediating factors

Practice Context

Work-life balance

Developmental learning

Attributes

Coping behaviours & relational skills

Personal history & sensitisation

Organisational structures

Supervision & peer support

Moral & ethical code

Political & legal frameworks

Professional identity

Knowledge, education & theory

Adamson, Beddoe & Davys (2012)

2. Relating to 'the other'

The practice focus of professionals – thinking about the 'other' not just about themselves

In part explains the conundrum in research that social work and other health and welfare professionals may score high on burnout questionnaires but still talk about getting job satisfaction

# 3. Importance of supervision as a space to reflect and process

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

Beddoe (2010); Beddoe, Davys & Adamson (2014)

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)

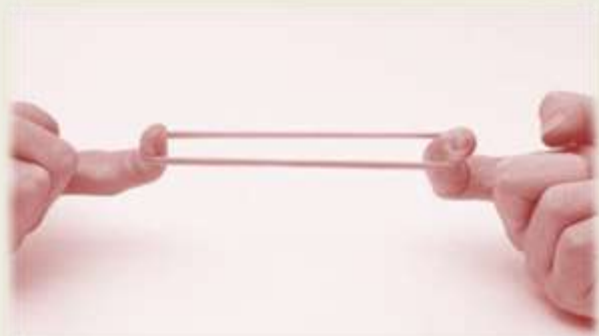# 4. Contribution to the definition of resilience
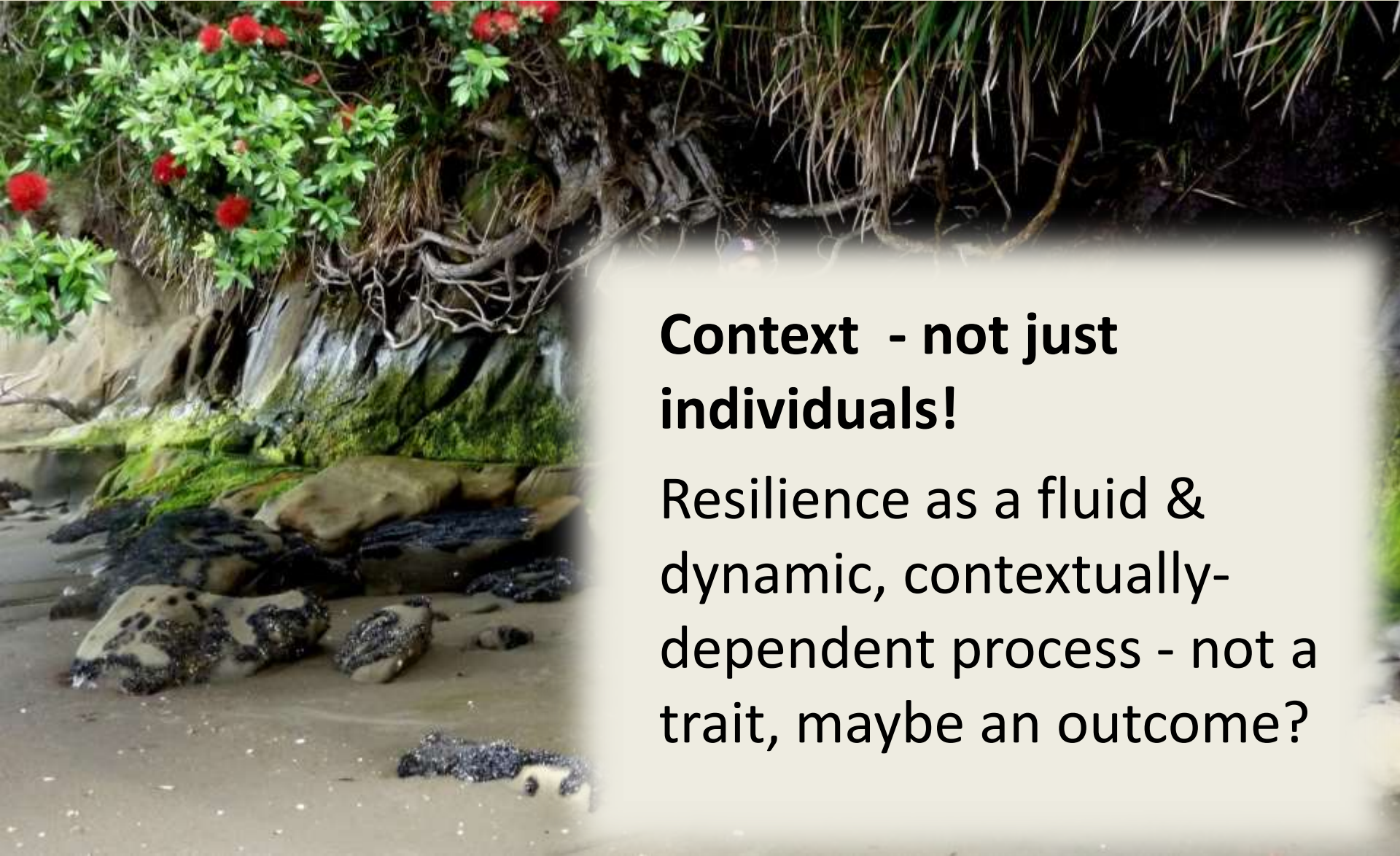
Context - not just individuals!

Resilience as a fluid & dynamic, contextually-dependent process - not a trait, maybe an outcome?

Defining resilience in our research

From our own research (Adamson, Beddoe & Davys, 2012):

'It's being deflated and then blowing up the balloon again' (Penny, Mental Health)

'The ability to keep on keeping on, perhaps how you bounce back in the face of adversity. It's something about perseverance, something about elasticity and flexibility' (June, student supervisor).

'The ability to survive the knocks . . . and like a rubber ball, you come back' (Yvonne, Mental Health).
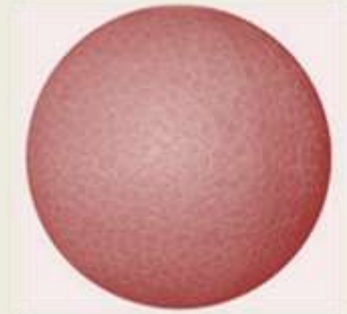
"What holds me firm [is] client-centredness and transparency of practice ... buttressed by the strong connection that I have with social work values and my legitimacy in terms of the social structures around me. So in my job description, the organisation I work for, the legislation that has certain expectations 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

So what do we do
with this knowledge about resilience?

If we define resilience *just* as the ability to withstand adversity, it does nothing to address the causes of the adversity in the first place

- It may instead focus upon the ability (or the responsibility) of the individual to accommodate the adversity, and may reflect a neoliberal agenda of focusing on the capacities and compliance of individuals to accept a status quo of inadequate resourcing, inequitable conditions and political agendas that work against long-term wellbeing

If we see the issue as informed by current research, then the emphasis is on context, community, social justice and human rights

- So it strengthens systemic and structural change within organisations, e.g. supervision, systems responses to stress, critical incidents etc.

Kia ora koutou

Thanks, everyone!

c.adamson@auckland.ac.nz

Some of the main references

Carole's blog on the resilience concept: http://socialworkresearchnz.wordpress.com/2014/02/07/the-resilience-of-the-resilience-concept-do-we-mean-what-we-think-we-mean/

Adamson, C. (2011). Supervision is Not Politically Innocent. *Australian Social Work, 65*(2), 185-196. 10.1080/0312407x.2011.618544

Adamson, C., Beddoe, L., & Davys, A. (2012). Building Resilient Practitioners: Definitions and Practitioner Understandings. *British Journal of Social Work, 32*(1), 100-117. 10.1093/bjsw/bcs142

Beddoe, L., Davys, A. M., & Adamson, C. (2014). 'Never Trust Anybody Who Says "I Don't Need Supervision"': Practitioners' Beliefs about Social Worker Resilience. *Practice*, 1-18. 10.1080/09503153.2014.896888

References (2)

Bottrell, D. (2009). Understanding 'Marginal' Perspectives: Towards a Social Theory of Resilience. *Qualitative Social Work, 8*(3), 321-339. 10.1177/1473325009337840

Luthar, S. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and Psychopathology, 12*(04), 857-885. doi:10.1017/S0954579400004156

Norris, F. H., Tracy, M., & Galea, S. (2009). Looking for resilience: Understanding the longitudinal trajectories of responses to stress. *Social Science & Medicine, 68*(12), 2190-2198. 10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.03.043

Thoits, P. A. (2010). Stress and Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 51*(1 suppl), S41-S53. 10.1177/0022146510383499

Ungar, M. (2004). *Nurturing Hidden Resilience in Troubled Youth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Ungar, M. (2008). Resilience across Cultures. *British Journal of Social Work, 38*(2), 218-235. 10.1093/bjsw/bcl343