Professional Resilience: The Relational Spiral In the Child Protection Workforce

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Why is this an important topic?

1. Retention and Turnover

Retention and turnover are major national and international issues in child protection Social Work with "burnout" and "occupational stress" being strongly associated with job exit. (Healy 2009, Hansung 2009, Burns 2009, Conrad 2006, and Anderson 2000).

"The well-being of children served by the child welfare system are put at risk by the difficulties child welfare agencies experience in recruiting and retaining competent staff as turnover results in staff shortages and high caseloads that impair workers' abilities to perform critical case management functions."
(Levy 2005)

2

Resilience Needed in Social Work

- Social work is exposed to the social injustice exposure to the most vulnerable groups in society across global contexts

- Important Example: Pressures on social workers to protect children from harm

- UK: Latest statement by David Cameron – prison for social workers

- Media and public expectations

- Child deaths and public outcry

- Backdrop: Concerns about retaining staff and hence experience

- Undesired retention during economic downturn

- Concerns about the potential for burnout and impact on service users

  - EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

  - DEPERSONALISATION

  - REDUCED PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

Burnout → Engagement (Resilience) Continuum

► Peoples psychological relationship to their jobs can be conceptualised as a continuum between burnout and job engagement. Three interrelated dimensions

► Exhaustion → Energy

► Cynicism → Involvement

► Inefficacy → Efficacy

Relational Resilience

- Interviews with 15 'leavers' and 15 'stayers'

- Significance of relationships in the workplace

- Teams, camaraderie and good leadership

- Manager has a critical role in supporting the team and nurturing early career social worker resilience

Why are relationships important?

▶ Socialization is the process whereby relational competence is nurtured, expressed shaped and reproduced by lifelong relationships, by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, and by experiencing difficult and joyful experiences (L'Abate, 2011).

▶ Relationships are therefore identified as one of the best predictors of resilience (Blum, 1998). As the perceived presence of a supportive social network enhances a person's capacity to deal with life's challenges (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994; Wagnild & Young, 1993).

▶ **Relationships alone will not support resilience if contextual factors are dominant and adverse**

Resilience is an Interactive Concept

"Resilience is an interactive concept that can only be studied if one looks at risk or protective factors" (Rutter 2010)

Rutter draws an example from medicine and the introduction of vaccinations as a method of preventing further disease.

This suggests that it is the experience of adversity that builds resilience (Rutter 2010, Van Breda 2014).

Quality of Supervision and manager as Protective Factor for Resilience

"Well, I think regular supervision that isn't put off or interrupted….I feel that my manager plays very much to my strengths and is able to identify what my strengths are as opposed to giving me cases because they're there, he'll try and develop what your weaknesses are at the same time."

(Julie, Family Support worker, 3.5 years' experience has worked in Gateway and Family Support).

Significance of Manager Experience

Qualitative responses to question regarding experiences of resilience and burnout (n = 162)

- ▶ 72 % mentioned experiencing some level of burnout requiring sick leave at points in their career

- ▶ More than 50 % (54%) said that resilience was down to relationships with a supportive manager

- ▶ One in three said that burnout was due to lack of support from their manager

- ▶ Some experienced a burnt out manager

What sustains you in this role?

Fidelma Family Support Social Worker 10 years

"Well some of that comes from the work situation, the team and the comradeship. And knowing that the senior cares about you. Knowing that some things you do actually does make a difference. To have a life outside of work…..That's important for energy to do the job as well."

Findings: Relational Leaver and Stayer Differences

	Leavers	Stayers
1	Relational Issue - Manager Issues • Poor Manager Support. Absence and criticism.	Relational Issue - Manager Issues • Manager Relationship Significance. Positive experience of a supportive manager.
2	Relational Factor - Impact of staff turnover on team • Peer and Team Relationships in flux • Inexperience in teams • Anxiety about 'making mistakes' • Camaraderie – but still left	Relational Factor - Impact of staff turnover on team • Peer and Team Relationships • Positive team and resilience • Camaraderie and feeling supported

Diagram 1: The Centrality of Positive Manager Experience and Organizational Culture and Climate

Positive Manager Experience 1

"She went out to place children at risk on New Year's Eve to take the pressure of us as we were flat out….an" I just thought "you wouldn't get that too often"….that's very, very rare." (Michelle, Gateway, 1.5 years' qualified and worked in Gateway since qualifying).

Positive Manager Supervision

"Supervision will always end with constructive feedback….and I think this is because my manager has adapted to what I need from supervision. That I feel it's very much a two-way process and to feel valued …I need to hear back from him. I need this sort of constructive criticism or praise, whatever's required." (Julie, Family Support worker, 3.5 years' experience, as above).

Diagram 2: The Centrality of Negative Manager Experience and Organizational Culture and Climate on Service Quality

Organizational Culture and Climate	Paperwork & Bureacracy	No Preventative Work	Service User Impact
Negative Manager Experience	Excess Hours	Absence & Sick Leave	Burnout
Negative Culture	Poor Team Cohesion	Job Exit	Impact on Family & Personal Life
Limited Support	Early Career Worker Unsupported	Individual Differences	Fear of Failure & Dangerousness
High Turnover	Low Experience	Negative Coping Undesired Retention	Quality of Practice

Unavailable Manager Experience for early career social workers and Fear of Things Going 'Badly Wrong'

*"Well in the team of six social workers there's five AYEs. – there's two in behind me and I'm in three and a half months' qualified. So you have five AYEs – and that's the experience, - it's just hectic, absolutely hectic. The team leader is six years qualified…and she is always up to her eyeballs in court and case conferences …we cannot pin her down when we need her…I am terrified that something will go badly wrong…! **I had a better induction in a shoe shop and already want out!"***

(Rhonda, Family Support, 3.5 months' qualified).

Staff Turnover and Inexperience

"Well because a lot of them are new workers coming in and this is their first experience of a team. The manager is always either in court or busy…And some of them are coming in and not lasting a week, literally not lasting a week because they can't cope with – **16 have come and gone in the last year…."**

(Cora is 5 years in practice and is about to leave a Family Support team and is going to work in Fostering).

Risk of Loss of Empathy

"…..you know firstly by families ringing, y 'know, and their feelings about the social worker. They begin to not care. And you know I've taken cases from someone who was definitely burnt out and what the family are saying that social services are crap….And that's when families and children are put at risk, when no relationship is developed with the family."

(Patricia, Family Support, 2 years' experience, same team since qualifying).

Social Worker Attrition Service User Impact

"I have so many service users that are quite angry, not because they're losing me as a social worker, it's not me personally, it's because they constantly have to change social worker. And that's not good enough and that's because we all keep leaving and moving on".

(Charmaine, Family Intervention, 6 months' experience).

Conclusion

▶ Many interactive factors at play. Political, cultural, organizational and structural issues

▶ Reference Wilkinson and Pickett 'The Spirit Level' societies with less inequality do better….

▶ Social workers exposure to the service user disadvantage 'occupy' the territory of processing trauma, abuse, inequalities, adversity and many social issues

▶ Staff burnout or resilience outcomes likely to impact on service user experience

▶ Need for evidence regarding pressures on social work to be communicated to government, commissioners, politicians and senior managers

▶ Medicine hits the headlines: Francis Report Mid Staffs on 'duty of candour' 'whistle-blower support'

▶ Social work: public and political pressure. Cameron and threat of imprisonment for SW (5 years)

▶ Call for political activism in social work. A This is only the beginning…

The End
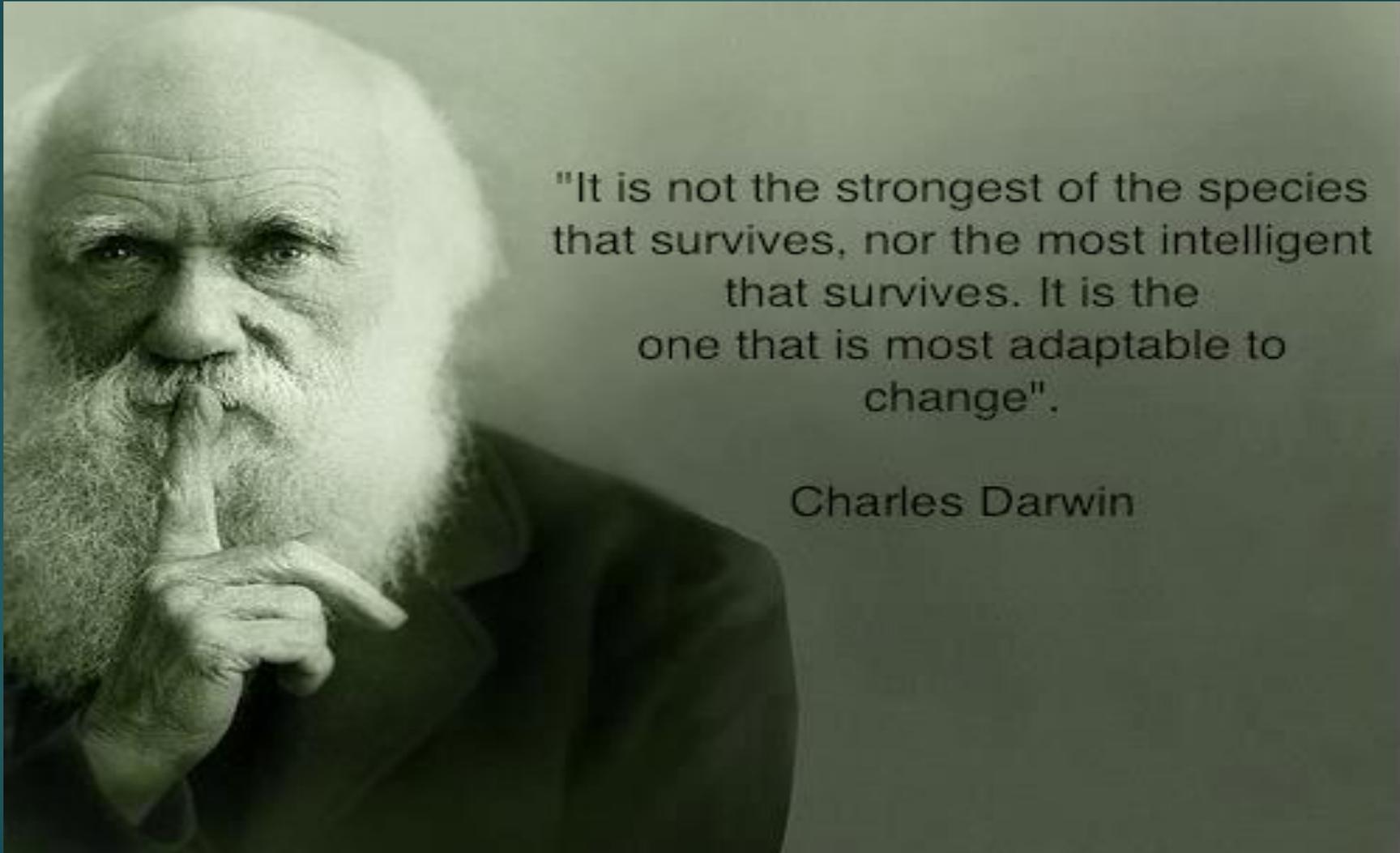
"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change".

Charles Darwin