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Resilient and Non-Resilient Behaviour in Adolescents

Sue Howard and Bruce Johnson

This paper reports research which focuses on the concept of 'resilience'—a new approach to looking at how protective factors and processes operate in the lives of young people identified as being "at risk". The study finds that resilience can be gained through protective factors and processes that may be located within the young person (for example, learned attitudes or beliefs); in the family context (for example, caring adults); or in schools and the community. The greater the number of protective factors and processes surrounding a young person, the more likely he or she is to exhibit resilience. This finding highlights the need for programs that provide support to families in crisis, and for greater recognition of the nurturing role schools can play through the establishment of clubs and associations on school premises. The study looked at young people who were classified as being "at risk" of engaging in delinquent behaviour but who did not do so. It found that young people who demonstrated resilience believed that they had control over their lives, had a more positive view and plans for the future, and a stronger sense of attachment to other people and institutions.

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It has been well documented, both in Australia (Eyers, Cormack & Barratt 1992; Cumming 1998) and overseas (Galton, Rudduck & Gray 1999; Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan 1996), that the transitional life stage of adolescence can be a difficult time for significant numbers of young people. Indeed, the international literature is replete with studies documenting a major concern with juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and teenage violence. Constructing adolescence as a time of turmoil and trouble, however, serves only to stigmatise and promote negative perceptions of adolescents and their families and does little to help solve the problems of young people.

A more constructive analysis of the demands of adolescence draws on the newly emerging literature on human resilience—defined by Masten, Best and Garmezy (1990, p. 425) as "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances". Rather than adopting a deficit perspective on youth issues, resilience-focused research seeks to identify the positive factors in adolescents' lives that help them cope with the new developmental tasks required of them by society (Howard, Dryden & Johnson 1999).

From this perspective, "problems" with adolescents are not so much located within the individual adolescent but within the social structures in which they are embedded. This perspective is

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congruent with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) which views the individual as developing within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment.

The notion of resilience emerged, almost by accident, from longitudinal developmental studies of “at risk” groups of children who encountered many life stressors as they grew towards adulthood (Werner & Smith 1987; Silva & Stanton 1996). Rather than focusing on those children and adolescents who were casualties of these stressors, a new set of studies began to focus instead on those young people who had not succumbed. The questions this work investigated were:

- What is it about these children and adolescents that enables them to survive?
- What makes them apparently immune to the factors that negatively affect others?

Instead of focusing on individual deficit, the new approach focused on individual and environmental strengths (“protective factors” and “protective processes”) that helped young people withstand high levels of “risk” and, thus, the concept of resilience emerged in the psychological literature.

The Study

This paper reports on some aspects of a recently completed qualitative research project which looked at the ways in which the kinds of protective factors and processes identified in the literature actually work in, or are absent from, the lives of adolescents in an Australian context.

Using a modified screening device that we had developed from our previous work with South Australian primary school children, we asked teachers in five State high schools (two in rural areas and three in disadvantaged metropolitan areas) and one metropolitan private Catholic college to

identify students “at risk” aged 13 to 16 years who were displaying “resilient” and “non-resilient” behaviour at the time of the study. This procedure produced 35 girls and 36 boys, 38 of whom were judged to be displaying more resilient behaviour (20 girls, 18 boys) and 33 displaying more non-resilient behaviour (15 girls and 18 boys).

These participants engaged in individual semi-structured interviews using the following questions. The questions were designed to elicit information regarding the availability and/or use of protective factors and processes in the young people’s lives:

- What are the most important things that have happened in your life?
- Who are the important people in your life?
- How do you like to spend your time?
- What do you like about your life?
- Are there things that have happened in your life that you wish had not happened?
- What are you proud of in your life?
- Have you some plans for the future?
- What do you think may help or hinder you in achieving those plans?
- What advice would you give to other young people about life?

The 71 interviews produced more than 1,000 pages of transcript for analysis. Our method for managing this huge quantity of data was to enter all 71 interviews into NUD•IST (QSR 1995), a software program for managing and supporting the analysis of qualitative data.

A Summary of Results and Suggested Interventions

A full analysis of the data is available elsewhere (Howard & Johnson 2000b). In the full report we make liberal use of quotes from the data to provide evidence of themes and subthemes that

emerged in and across the young people’s talk. Such an approach is inappropriate in a short article and so we shall present the findings in summarised form under the headings of Bronfenbrenner’s *microsystem* sites—home, school and community. At the same time we will indicate how microsystem interventions could be implemented to strengthen protective factors and reduce the impact of risk factors.

Home

Young people displaying resilient behaviour were far more likely to talk in ways that indicated they had a sense of autonomy or personal agency—that is, they believed they could control their lives and what happened to them. They did not see themselves as victims of fate or circumstance; they did not accept personal weaknesses and faults as unchangeable traits that would prevent them from being successful in the future.

Following are specific findings and recommendations regarding the protective factors of autonomy and personal agency in relation to the family setting.

Several non-resilient participants in this study described responses to events and incidents where a “victim orientation” was either modelled or encouraged by family members. Similarly, “failures” were either excused or blamed on others. Resilient students, on the other hand, were more likely to report discussing problems with family members and being encouraged to face up to difficulties in constructive ways. Family members need to be able to recognise and challenge self-defeating talk and learned helplessness in young people. At the same time, it is important to model autonomous, personally responsible behaviour wherever possible.

Many non-resilient students in this study appeared to have few strategies for dealing with problems, apart from lashing out

or fatalistically accepting circumstances. Adults and older siblings need to consciously model problem-solving behaviour. That is, they need to think out loud when faced with problems, to show, for example, how alternative solutions can be generated; how the pros and cons of each possible solution can be weighed up; how different outcomes will demand different courses of personal action.

Resilient respondents tended to have chores and tasks that had to be carried out (albeit often under protest) for the good of the family. Often non-resilient students reported that they were supposed to undertake chores but rarely did because no-one forced them to. Requiring young people to take responsibility for practical matters within the family encourages competence, responsibility, self worth, a sense of connectedness and so on.

Connectedness to at least one adult whose unconditional positive regard can be relied upon is a vital ingredient in the development of resilient behaviour. This person need not be a family member but this study's respondents' expressed attachment to parents in particular suggests that this is desirable if it is possible. Family members need to be aware that connectedness involves:

- spending time with the young person, taking an interest in their activities and being proud of their achievements;
- demonstrating that they care about the young person by, for example, setting reasonable rules and demanding certain standards of behaviour;
- being receptive when the young person wishes to talk about problems; and
- encouraging and supporting the young person in his or her activities at school and outside the home.

Family intactness was no guarantee of resilient behaviour in young people in this study. Nevertheless, attachment to parents (no matter how neglectful or abusive they appeared to be)

and the palpable sense of loss expressed by many respondents who were separated from one or both parents, suggests that wherever possible it is important to help families deal with their problems before they get to the point of no return. There are already a number of programs run by government and private social welfare agencies that attempt to help families resolve differences or cope during periods of severe stress. More and better-targeted intervention programs designed to offer a variety of forms of assistance at the first indications of family distress, and which operate on a "family development" model, are likely to be more successful in helping families stay together.

School

The first major difference between resilient and non-resilient participants in this study lay in the way those who were classified as resilient talked, often with pride, about personal achievements and accomplishments.

While it might be thought that teaching for achievement and mastery was the core business of schools, some recent research (Howard & Johnson 2000a) suggests that for some (primary) schools, especially those in disadvantaged areas, these aims have slipped somewhat down the list of priorities. Too often, it seems, teachers are forced to abandon their central focus on teaching and learning because many troubled students present with social or behavioural problems that absorb available time and energy.

There are a number of ways in which schools can refocus on the goal of helping students achieve mastery and competence. In this study, those students who claimed pride in personal achievements referred to sporting success and other skills often developed outside the school. Not only should schools refocus on academic mastery and achievement for all students, but

the range of ways in which students can demonstrate achievement also needs to be expanded. Achievements in art, drama, music, vocational education, work experience, leadership, social skills and so on, all need to be publicly recognised and valued.

What individuals judge as "achievement" is relative. One young resilient participant knew that he was less competent than his classmates in reading skills. However, his involvement in a structured program that was gradually but perceptibly developing these skills was giving him a real sense of achievement and pride. Criterion-based assessment practices should be utilised more extensively in order to provide low achievers with a genuine sense of progress and achievement.

In this study, many students were not academically oriented but rather were firmly focused on the world of work beyond school. Vocational education and work experience programs that are rigorous and well structured can provide students with a real sense of achievement and a future orientation. Too often, however, such subjects have a "second-class" label attached to them compared with more traditional "academic" subjects.

Many non-resilient students claimed their teachers "picked on them", ignored them or favoured the "kids who were good at stuff". Teachers need to be careful to hold high expectations for all students and not allow the presenting behaviours of some non-resilient students (for example, low self-esteem, victim orientation) to turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Many non-resilient students in this study appeared to have poor study skills and few useful learning strategies. All students need to learn the relationship between achievement and good study strategies. They should be taught *explicitly* how to study. The specific values of goal

setting, effort and practice in relation to mastery need to be emphasised.

More resilient than non-resilient students reported being involved in organised sporting and non-sporting clubs and associations but few of these groups were associated with the students' schools. Schools should support such clubs and associations on school premises and during school time. Many of these (for example, army cadets, computer clubs) enable young people to develop skills and competencies that are beyond the range possible in most school subjects.

The second important difference between resilient and non-resilient students' talk concerned the extent to which they expressed a sense of belonging and connectedness to people outside the family—people associated with school, peer groups, sporting clubs and so on. Non-resilient students, on the other hand, were less inclined to express a firm and confident sense of attachment to other people or institutions.

Schools can engage in specific practices that will help develop a sense of belonging and connectedness. Teachers are well placed to act as the significant, caring adult in a young person's life. In each school in this study, the same teachers' names cropped up time and time again as people the respondents valued and respected; people they felt took an interest in them; people with whom they felt comfortable talking about problems. Teachers need to be prepared to undertake this important role when necessary.

Schools should have access to extensive resources to serve the personal, social and counselling needs of difficult or troubled students. Many non-resilient young people in this study clearly had complex needs that were beyond the expertise of ordinary teachers. Without specialised help, these students are unlikely

to feel a sense of connectedness to the school—and, indeed, those in our study did not. In addition, their troublesome behaviour often made it difficult for other students to experience a sense of connectedness to school and teachers.

It is important for schools to realise how important young people's social needs are, especially in Years 8 and 9. In this study, learning how to make and keep friends—to become connected to peers—appeared to be a major preoccupation among the participants, to the extent that many of them talked of school principally as a social centre rather than a learning centre. The school needs to support young people in this regard. Again, school-based clubs and associations that support organised sporting and non-sporting activities are important here. Not only do they provide opportunities for connecting with competent, caring adults, they also provide plenty of opportunities for learning and practising social skills. School-based clubs and associations that provide opportunity for leadership and service are good ways of encouraging connectedness to others.

Once again, a sense of autonomy and personal agency was very evident in resilient students' talk about school. The opposite was frequently to be found in the talk of non-resilient students.

Many non-resilient students in this study were quick to claim they "just couldn't do" particular school subjects; they were prone to blaming others for their lack of success; they dismissed rather than attempted to solve problems. Teachers have an important role to play in challenging both defeatist talk and learned helplessness in students and in modelling problem-solving behaviour. In their feedback to students, teachers must take care to attribute failure to such things as

lack of effort or poor preparation (things within a student's control) rather than lack of ability (beyond a student's control).

Non-resilient students were far more likely than resilient ones to talk about being involved in violent interpersonal conflict, particularly at school. Young people need to be taught how to take control of conflict situations in socially acceptable ways. Behaviour management policies should reinforce the conflict resolution skills that should be explicitly taught.

Resilient and non-resilient students differed in the extent to which they expressed a positive future orientation. In this study, the resilient respondents generally had very positive views and definite plans about their futures. The non-resilient participants, on the other hand, talked about the future with less eager anticipation and more apprehension. They had fewer and humbler ambitions.

All students had absorbed the rhetoric about the importance of work and "getting a good job", but the differences in career aspirations between the resilient and non-resilient students were markedly different and not necessarily a reflection of their academic records. Vocational and career advice provided by schools needs to be comprehensive, up-to-date and it should provide a range of challenging (but achievable) options for all students. Careers advisers, like classroom teachers, need to ensure that the presenting behaviours of non-resilient students do not influence their judgments about appropriate career choices (that is, creating self-fulfilling prophecies).

The narrow work-oriented view that many non-resilient students in this study have towards their education leads them to reject as "useless" or "pointless" such subjects as Society and Environment, Drama and Science. Obviously these subjects have intrinsic value for

all students but may need to be “sold” in different kinds of ways if they are to engage all students effectively.

Community

Community audits in the target areas were beyond the scope of this study, so it is not clear what facilities and services are actually available to young people in these locations. However, with the exception of a few sports teams and associations (especially in the country towns), very few respondents appear to use community resources or be involved with local organisations of any kind. This suggests that either there are very few available or that those in existence are unattractive to young people.

Of course the local community has a role to play in developing youth—in helping to create resilient young people. The community should be a source of caring adults; of opportunities for leadership and service; of places where young people can safely socialise; of organisations that can teach new and interesting skills. The reality, however, often falls far short of this. Young people congregate en masse in shopping centres or use public spaces to practice their skateboarding and thus make local people fearful and inclined to the view that the young are problems to be fixed rather than resources to be developed.

Communities that are serious about youth development will develop a collaborative approach with local schools, families and young people in order to provide the kinds of support that will be valued and used.

In general, local communities need to support (either alone or in partnership with businesses, schools, social or local government agencies) a range of organised sporting and non-sporting clubs and associations for young people. The types of clubs provided will depend on such local factors as the expertise of local people willing to help run them, the preferences of the

young people participating, and the willingness of community groups to provide equipment, space and so on. In general, these organisations will:

- put young people in contact with caring adults;
- teach useful skills and competencies;
- provide opportunities for socialising;
- encourage young people to use their skills for the benefit of others; and
- allow young people to develop leadership skills.

Given the popularity of bike riding among young males in this study, local councils could look for ways to provide suitable areas (preferably with rugged terrain) for bike riders to practise their skills.

Given the popularity of “talking with friends” as a pastime among young females in this study, local councils or shopping centres could look for ways of providing safe and comfortable public spaces for young people to meet, talk, play music and so on.

Community service organisations (for example, St. Johns Ambulance, the Country Fire Service, the State Emergency Service) and activist organisations (for example, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Landcare, the World Wildlife Fund) should be encouraged to develop and actively recruit young people into youth chapters or cadet groups.

Being involved with organised sport was a major feature of the resilient participants’ lives. The small country town in the study had a high success rate here because, as one student explained, you do not have to be a star to be involved in country sport—“everyone gets a guernsey”. City communities need to give some thought to ways in which they can likewise involve everyone who wants to play (not just the star players) in organised sporting activities.

Conclusion

Young adolescents identified as being at risk are many times more likely than those not so identified to develop antisocial behaviours, to abuse alcohol and drugs, to experience unwanted teen pregnancy, to drop out of school and to be both the perpetrators and the victims of personal violence (Rutter 1980; Dryfoos 1990). These facts are not new and the indicators of risk have changed very little over the last few decades (see West & Farrington 1973; West 1982). What is new is the concept of resilience and its utility in understanding how risk may be minimised or avoided.

In the present study we have shown how protective factors and processes operate in the lives of young people identified as being at risk. These protective factors and processes may be located within the young person (learned attitudes, beliefs) or they may be found in the family context (caring adults). The school and the community can also be sources of protective factors and processes (for example, schools that teach for mastery, and local councils that provide recreational facilities and opportunities for young people to socialise). There is no single combination of protective factors and processes that can be identified as being better than any other—resilient young people will draw on what is available. What is certain is that “the more the better”—the more protective factors and processes that the young person can mobilise, the more likely they are to display resilient behaviour. Of course, the reverse is true too—the fewer the protective factors and processes, the more likely the young person will display non-resilient behaviour. The task, clearly, is to ensure that all young people have access to as many protective factors and learn as many protective processes as possible.

Note

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