
CHAPTER 1

Contextual and Cultural Aspects of Resilience in Child Welfare Settings

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Children under child welfare mandates are known to have higher rates of problem behaviours, mental illness, and delinquency than other children (Arcelus, Bellerby, & Vostanis, 1999; Haapasalo, 2000; Kroll et al., 2002; Webb & Harden, 2003). Efforts to meet the needs of these children and prevent the possible negative impact of intervention have led to innovations in child welfare services. A short list of these includes the Looking After Children case review process (Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006); Family Group Conferencing in which families, community members, and formal care providers work out a collaborative response to one family's needs (Burford & Hudson, 2000); Systems of Care's coordinated culturally relevant approaches to service (Hernandez et al., 2001); and, in Aboriginal communities, Kinship Adoption, which places children in culturally relevant foster care that erects fewer boundaries between adopted and natural families (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). Each of these efforts creates structural conditions in which children can experience more say in their service plans and receive services appropriate to their needs and cultures. These opportunity structures help children and

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families succeed despite exposure to chronic and acute stressors such as poverty, violence, abuse, dislocation, and marginalization due to race, ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation.

What these programs share is their responsiveness to children and families. When they work, they help individuals achieve positive developmental outcomes that are sometimes described as resilience (Masten, 2001). Seen this way, resilience is more than a trait of the child. It results from the interaction between the child and his or her environment. When social workers and other helping professionals shape that environment, resilience is more likely to result (Leadbeater, Dodgen, & Solarz, 2005).

This chapter will explore the concept of resilience as it relates to clients of child welfare organizations. It will argue that resilience as an outcome emerges, at least in part, from the opportunities children have to access the psychological, emotional, relational, and instrumental supports they need to thrive while growing up under adverse circumstances. Further, it will argue that child welfare services can help to create the environmental conditions for positive development through planned systemic intervention.

What, though, do children do when they have no access to the resources provided by professional helpers and their services? How do they survive? For other children who are offered these resources, how do we explain their reluctance to engage with service providers? Children lacking resources and others who refuse service may manifest troubling behaviours typically diagnosed in child welfare populations such as self-harm, truancy, delinquency, and drug abuse. A broader view of resilience can help us to understand these troubling behaviours by clients of child welfare services. Although they may be indicators of disordered attachments, post-traumatic stress, and cognitive distortions, these behaviours are not always a sign of the child's vulnerability. In many instances such problem behaviours are contextually and culturally relevant expressions of resilience, a hidden resilience overlooked by care providers (Ungar, 2004). To show that the notion of resilience can be usefully applied to interventions with these "problem" children, I will make a three-part argument.

First, outcomes associated with resilience, like staying in school or avoiding early pregnancy, are culturally embedded. Diverse cultural groups define benchmarks of successful development different-

ly. Some benchmarks are almost universal, while others are very specific to one group or another. When, after all, is the right time for girls and boys to become sexually active? The answer is of course dependent on historical and social forces that constrain the behaviours of young people.

Second, culture and context determine whether the interventions and programming that are offered to a child in need of protection are seen by the child, family, and community as helpful resources. For example, while educating one's children is a near universal desire for families, in many parts of the world parents would prefer their children not attend school and instead contribute to the family income. The gender of the child, a country's relative wealth, whether the family is rural or urban, and even religious views, all influence whether a child is sent to school or not. Even where schools are available, not all families will choose to access educational resources.

Third, children who thrive make do with whatever is available to them, and what they perceive as useful to sustaining themselves. A child may not attend school, but that does not mean that he or she does not find a sense of self-worth, competence, maturity, and self-efficacy through contribution as a member of a street gang or child labourer. This is not an argument for blindly accepting children's and families' decisions as socially valid. My intention instead is to make service providers open to hearing children's own definitions of their pathways to resilience and the cultural and contextual relevance of their decisions.

The argument is of course heuristic. Children's culture and context constrain their choice of what they think will help them survive. Culture defines for children the appropriate outcomes that are benchmarks of success. A child's survival strategies may, therefore, make perfect sense to a child and his or her community in one context, but be completely unintelligible if judged by an outsider to that context. Of course, defining insiders and outsiders leads us into contested territory.

Children may exist in any number of communities simultaneously: the community where they live; the cultural community with which they identify; their community of peers; or a community formed by exclusion, as when children who are marginalized by ability or sexual orientation group together. Children who do exist in two

or more communities simultaneously may experience some conflict of values, and they may not know which values to follow for their own positive growth. Such plurality provides many avenues to resilience. Viewed through the binocular lenses of culture and context, even socially unpopular behaviour by a child or the family that resists intervention or places the child more in harm's way may, in fact, be the child and family's hidden pathway to resilience. Understanding a child's hidden resilience as a cultural artifact expressed in a particular context can inform interventions that are less likely to be resisted. A discussion of the implications of this understanding to intervention forms the final part of this chapter.

RESILIENCE AS CONTEXTUALIZED THEORY

In the mid to late 1900s, researchers of psychopathology and its manifest problem behaviours routinely identified in their studies subpopulations of children, who, despite exposure to the same risks as their disordered peers, had managed to develop successfully. Early pioneers of resilience research changed the focus of their studies (or at the very least, incorporated a dual focus into their work) to study these young people who thrived as a distinct group from those who showed problems. Normative positive development under stress came to be known as resilience. As Crawford, Wright, and Masten (2005) explained, the study of resilience came to be the "search for knowledge about the processes that could account for positive adaptation and development in the context of adversity and disadvantage" (p. 355). Many of the early studies included populations of children typically served by social workers, including children with mothers who had schizophrenia (Garmezy, 1976) and children marginalized by poverty and neglect (Werner & Smith, 1982). Initially, researchers searched for individual traits that predicted variable outcomes among children. Temperament was one such trait (Rutter, 1987). A more evoking child with a less explosive temperament would be expected to thrive better than the peer with more impulsive characteristics. This view of children's resiliency, or inner characteristics, soon gave way to more contextualized understandings of the mechanisms that influenced positive outcomes. It was about this same time that ecological theory, notably that of Bronfenbrenner (1979) in psychology

and Meyer (1983) in social work, began to focus as much on the person in context as the person.

Resilience research kept pace. Rutter's (1987) and Garmezy's (1976, 1987) work in the 1970s and 1980s began to shift focus to protective mechanisms that are processes at the interface of individuals and their environments that predict positive outcomes. Among the best known of these processes are Garmezy's (1987) three:

1. The personality dispositions of the child
2. A supportive family milieu
3. An external support system that encourages and reinforces a child's coping efforts and strengthens these by inculcating positive values (p. 166)

Individually, or in combination, a growing body of research is demonstrating the positive outcomes that result from these and other similar processes when they function for children who experience severe disadvantage (see, for example, Fraser, 1997).

ARGUMENT ONE: THE CONCEPT OF RESILIENCE MUST BE CULTURALLY EMBEDDED

There was little discussion early on about the cultural relativism of this work. Resilience, like most Western-based concepts, was presented as distilling a homogeneous set of truths that could be applied to all populations. When studies were done with non-Aboriginal children and families, or in countries other than Western democracies, the testing instruments and protocols were the same across studies, and the benchmarks of success remained consistent. While this increased the generalizability of findings, we can now look back and wonder at the validity of the results. One could speculate, as many have, whether broader cultural forces were overlooked and patterns of successful adaptation ignored when these did not conform to expected behaviour for dominant cultural groups (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Werner & Smith, 2001; Wong & Wong, 2006). This distinction is easy to see when one thinks, for example, of street children (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Hecht, 1998). Some are runaways, leaving homes to find safety among peers, adventure, or a sense of themselves as

grown-up. A second group of children, sometimes termed "throw-aways," have been pushed from their homes unwillingly. Both groups may account for their experiences of survival very differently, and define themselves as more or less successful depending on the contextual factors that brought them to the street (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

Sensitivity to culture and context are now much more evident in the resilience literature. Researchers globally are beginning to use the construct to identify both similar and divergent patterns to the way protective mechanisms work and the benchmarks communities use to judge successful outcomes (Chun, Moos, & Cronkite, 2006; Ungar, 2005). Furthermore, researchers are encouraging a more nuanced view of stereotypically marginalized cultural groups who tend to be seen as having more problems. As Leadbeater, Dodgen, and Solarz (2005) have explained, risk statistics can cause us to overlook the number of children and families doing well. Careful longitudinal research such as that by Lalonde (2006) has shown that even widespread problems like youth suicide among Aboriginal youth does not occur in all Aboriginal communities. It is situational and related to structural conditions such as participation by women in government, equitable treatment in dispute resolution processes, availability of cultural facilities, and control over education by the community itself.

Therefore, understanding resilience among children and families requires sensitivity to multiple points of view, especially when those we are trying to understand are from marginalized communities. Even among these individuals on the fringes of the mainstream, one can find stories of survival, though these stories may not typically be those celebrated by outsiders. After all, the child who is poor and raised without opportunities for higher education, or whose abilities academically are not likely to get him or her to university or even college because of poverty, may choose delinquency as one way to find a modicum of respect from peers in his or her community (Dei, Massuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997). The Innu boy of northern Canada who leaves formal schooling at age 12 to learn traditional ways of life on the land may be living an anachronism and putting himself at risk for future success beyond his community, but his behaviour is not without purpose and meaning inside his culture (Innu Nation, 1995). It may in fact be protective if it guards that same child against feel-

ings of anomie and failure that traditional education may bring. Without a thorough appreciation for the context in which dangerous, delinquent, deviant, and disordered behaviour manifests, it is impossible to argue whether one child is more or less resilient than another (Ungar, 2001). All one can say, based on research with a number of marginalized populations globally, is that these children cope in ways that exploit the opportunities available to them (Solis, 2003; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995).

Clara's Story

Fourteen-year-old Clara is known in her community as one of its most troubled youth. Her mother struggles with an alcohol addiction. Since her birth, Clara has witnessed one man after another take up residence in their home and try to father her. She has been the victim of abuse—physical and sexual—and watched her mother experience the same. Adding to the chaos, the family survives on meager social assistance in subsidized housing in a neighbourhood where there are serious safety issues for children and women. Though Clara is Caucasian, her world is a world apart from that of her middle-class peers at the junior high where she is bussed. Social workers have tried to provide as many resources as they can to Clara and her mother. Little has been helpful. Clara was removed from her home twice. Both times she required intensive support and supervision and demanded to be returned home. Clara insists her mother needs her and willingly takes on the role of her protector. Their home looks like it is run by a 14-year-old, with dishes piled high and the garbage overflowing behind their two-bedroom townhouse. Clara attends school only sporadically. Truancy officers have all but given up trying to develop individualized education plans or rouse her out of bed to get to school. Child protection workers no longer see the danger posed to Clara as sufficient to warrant removing her again.

In this context, it is not surprising that Clara has taken to the street and lives among her peers most days. It is there that she finds a measure of security and a sense of belonging. Her proudest moment, she says, was when the local newspaper took a picture of her sitting on the stoop of a corner store with a bunch of her friends. The newspaper had described her in its article as the leader of a gang of girls ter-

rorizing their neighbourhood. Far from a problem for Clara, she saw this as a sign of her success. She was, she insisted, still doing better than anyone might expect, given what she had to work with. She wasn't suicidal, she hadn't run away from home entirely, and she wasn't prostituting herself like other girls she'd met in care. Instead, she'd staked her survival on her identity as a gang leader, a label that brought her security and recognition in her community of peers.

Clinically speaking, these benchmarks of success are contextually relevant expressions of what it means to survive in Clara's world. Clara is taking advantage of the resources that she perceives as available to create continuity in her identity as a youth who can control her world. It is a highly specific definition of resilience with which most of us would disagree, but one that nevertheless is functional for Clara. Helping Clara to change how she expresses that resilience and the mechanisms she uses to achieve well-being is a challenge for future intervention. Whatever form that intervention takes, however, it will have to take into account Clara's own view of herself as a thriving individual.

ARGUMENT TWO: AVAILABLE RESOURCES CIRCUMSCRIBE EXPRESSIONS OF RESILIENCE

Theories of resilience highlight factors that exert different patterns of influence on children who are exposed to multiple adversities. According to Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), resilience factors can function in a number of ways. First, they can maintain a child's functioning under stress, protecting the child as stress increases. These factors are equally potent in the lives of children from both high- and low-risk environments, meaning that their influence is like that of a good teacher whose help equally affects any child in need. Second, a protective factor may also interact with stressors to create growth in a child who is exposed to adversity. This notion of challenge makes it likely that the child exposed to more risk will actually do better in life because of the "steeling effect" of exposure. Child welfare interventions seldom view children's exposure to risk as positive, and usually work to minimize such exposure. Third, the protective factors that are most often the focus of child welfare are those that help to maintain normative levels of competence in children

exposed to multiple risks. In other words, workers try to keep children functioning at levels that would be expected of them if they had grown up without exposure to heightened levels of challenge. Fourth, there are often cases where children are doing much worse than expected because of the multiple disruptions to their normal development. Although children may show signs of deterioration, or an increase in problem behaviour, workers seek to prevent the decline from occurring too rapidly, or seek to prevent a child from declining more than necessary. For example, for a child who shows self-harming behaviour after a sexual assault, the goal might be harm reduction rather than cessation of the behaviour altogether (Levenkron, 2006). Similarly, the disruption to children's homes and increasing poverty after divorce can cause children to decline in their functioning temporarily. However, positive relationships with adults, mentors, and stable school environments can all mediate the impact of the crisis at home (Lipman, Offord, Dooley, & Boyle, 2002).

What we know then is that risk factors interact with protective factors and conditions of the child's context and culture to produce differential effects. Any protective mechanism cannot categorically be said to affect all children equally. A child's acting out behaviours that result in a referral for counselling or placement may cause us to overlook the fact that the child has many resources that may have prevented his or her behaviour from becoming even *more* of a problem. The function of protective mechanisms may be difficult to perceive when problems appear to have reached the clinical stage and require intervention. Without an appreciation for the hidden qualities of resilience amid a child's more overt problem behaviours, professionals may mistakenly disrupt a child's own coping strategies.

What this tells us is that the resources available to children will circumscribe how they express their resilience. Cultures, and contexts within cultures (e.g., poor or rich, practising or non-practising religion), present children with opportunities that make sense to those who are the gatekeepers of the resources. Available health resources, for example, represent the values of a society at a given time, and are enacted through the political and social processes that distribute resources. The available resources we can use as social workers to help children achieve resilience are also culturally bound. Incarceration of young offenders for non-violent offences, for exam-

ple, though lacking empirical support for effectively changing behaviour, is nonetheless still funded because of a public perception that we need to get tough on crime (Hylton, 2001). Such moral panic is neither statistically justified, nor clinically indicated, and yet boot camps continue to be used as intervention. This relationship between culture and the availability of resources can be seen more clearly when children's accounts of their resilience are gathered from around the globe.

In a recent study of youth who face multiple culturally relevant risks in 14 communities on five continents, Ungar and his colleagues (Ungar, Lee, Callaghan, & Boothroyd, 2005; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2005) investigated the ways in which youth demonstrate unique patterns of survival. Known as the International Resilience Project (IRP), over 1,500 youth were surveyed using a standardized instrument developed for the project, and another 89 youth were invited to participate in one- to two-hour qualitative interviews. Each community invited participation of youth facing at least three significant risk factors such as poverty, violence, family dislocation, cultural disintegration, mental illness of a parent, and war. Youth were then selected by local advisors on the basis of their perceived success, with the cohorts divided into those "doing well" and those "not doing well" as defined by community standards. Using an iterative research design, international partners met twice face-to-face; first, to design both a quantitative instrument and qualitative interview guides and; later, to review findings. The novelty of this participatory design allowed for community partners to negotiate between themselves a set of 32 common factors that were believed to influence positive outcomes across all populations. These included factors such as self-efficacy, parental monitoring, family routines and rituals, meaningful involvement in one's community, and cultural adherence. These factors were the basis for a 58-item questionnaire distributed to youth in all 14 communities. Qualitative interviews helped discern patterns of how youth make use of their personal, family, community, and cultural resources to promote and sustain well-being.

In contexts as diverse as Winnipeg's urban Aboriginal community, a Moscow orphanage, and a middle school in Hong Kong, children showed evidence of a variety of contextually relevant coping strategies with trends towards both homogeneity and heterogeneity across subpopulations. Although far from representative, and still only

exploratory given the limited size of the sample, the study's findings suggest that there are both global and culturally specific aspects to resilience (Ungar, in press). The qualitative data, in particular, was useful in understanding why children select different strategies to cope with contextually specific risks. Using a grounded theory approach to the analyses, and the dialogical process of member checks and reciprocity in the design, seven "tensions" were identified that could account for the youth participants' experiences of positive growth. These seven tensions are:

1. *Access to material resources*: Availability of financial, educational, medical, and employment assistance and/or opportunities, as well as access to food, clothing, and shelter.
2. *Relationships*: Relationships with significant others, peers, and adults within one's family and community.
3. *Identity*: Personal and collective sense of purpose, self-appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, aspirations, beliefs and values, including spiritual and religious identification.
4. *Power and control*: Experiences of caring for one's self and others; the ability to affect change in one's social and physical environment in order to access health resources.
5. *Cultural adherence*: Adherence to one's local and/or global cultural practices, values, and beliefs.
6. *Social justice*: Experiences related to finding a meaningful role in community and social equality.
7. *Cohesion*: Balancing one's personal interests with a sense of responsibility to the greater good; feeling a part of something larger than one's self socially and spiritually.

Findings show that *youth who experience themselves as resilient and are seen by their communities as resilient are those that successfully navigate their way through these tensions, each in their own way, and according to the strengths and resources available to the youth personally, within family, community, and culture*. In practice, this means that youth say they must find ways to use the resources they have at hand to create for themselves the optimal conditions for their development. Families and communities provide different

resources depending on cultural and contextual factors, such as:

- Availability (Are the resources there in the community?)
- Access (If a resource is available, is it accessible to those who need it?)
- Appropriateness (Is what is available and accessible culturally relevant and respectful of people's values?)
- Advocacy (Does the community have the power to advocate for the resources it needs for its children when they are not available, accessible, or appropriate?)

John's Story

The seven tensions discussed earlier are a useful way of looking at the life of a young Aboriginal man, John, growing up in Canada, and more especially at the way he copes. Viewing John's life as patterned development targeted at resolving the seven tensions simultaneously, we see a pathway to resilience that is culturally and contextually specific. John survives the many stressors he faces in his community by finding conventional and unconventional (hidden) ways to bolster his identity as a competent young Aboriginal man.

John has been in and out of jail most of his adolescence. He seldom spent time at home with his mother or father. In the past, he has been found guilty of assault and theft. He is known in his community as a youth who is constantly in trouble, and who frequently breaks his probation orders. By 15, John had left school. His only contact with adults tended to be through mandated social services such as probation. Evidently, John's life was becoming progressively worse until, on a temporary absence from custody at age 16, he went to visit his uncle, a fisher involved in an armed struggle with Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) officers over Aboriginal treaty rights to fish. Upon his return to custody, John enjoyed sharing stories of being on his uncle's boat while DFO officers fired shots across their bow to get them to stop fishing. These acts of resistance, and John's later identification with members of an Aboriginal Warriors Society, proved to be a powerful force in his life for change. Upon discharge, he returned to join his uncle fishing.

John's strong cultural adherence, and an identity narrative that is linked to that adherence, has been a significant coping strategy in his life. Becoming—in his eyes—a warrior has helped him to access experiences of social justice that are now available in his community. With these experiences have come significant relationships with influential adults who have encouraged John to channel his negative behaviours in pro-social directions (although, pro-social behaviour can mean different things to different people). John's resulting relationships and growing sense of cohesion with others in his community, and the instrumental support that has come with his ability to earn his own income as a fisher, have all combined to result in John viewing himself as a successful individual. It is this sense of success that has mitigated many of the risks he faces and that has led him to be seen by others in ways that outsiders to the community (e.g., researchers) characterize as resilient. This new self-concept is sufficiently powerful to offer John a viable alternative to his former lifestyle as a violent and drug-abusing youth.

Of course, one could never prescribe an intervention that purposefully places a young person in a situation of armed conflict. It would be unethical. However, it is important to understand what worked in such a case, and why it worked: interventions that address the seven tensions, and that respect the various positive outcomes different cultures define for themselves (and different contexts as well), will probably succeed with youth who display problem behaviours.

There is nothing all that surprising in John's solution to his problems. A great deal of literature on resilience has already shown that meaningful involvement in community, a sense of citizenship, experiences of efficacy, attachment to mentoring adults, the attainment of job skills, and a change of peer group can all help children succeed (Moore & Lippman, 2005). The resources that make these outcomes possible, however, are not common across all cultures and contexts. One would never imagine encouraging an urban Caucasian youth like Clara to join an armed resistance movement. It is the very specificity of the solution John finds that makes his experience a powerful catalyst.

In practice, the interaction between the seven tensions can be seen at the level of individual case studies. Individuals show different forms of pro-social and anti-social behaviour, though as was seen

above, such distinctions can be arbitrary when viewed beyond a specific child's context and culture. To illustrate, researchers holding focus groups with youth in Israel and Palestine noted that there was a significant difference in how youth in the two countries expressed their desire to participate in the political process for securing their rights. Both make do with what opportunities their societies provide them. Israeli men are required to participate in their armed forces for up to three years (women for two years), immediately following graduation from secondary school. This means that all Israeli youth are required to be part of the defence of their country. In Israel, participation in the armed forces is seen as a legitimate way youth participate and make a contribution (Bar-On, 1999). On the other hand, Palestinian youth in East Jerusalem and Ramallah said they throw stones at soldiers and resist the Israeli occupation of their land in any way they can. They tell stories of being part of the protests that often turn deadly, with casualties on both sides. Youth leaders in Palestine say that the throwing of rocks, while dangerous, prevents youth from feeling completely disempowered given the lack of a legitimate form of political self-expression.

Although it is not the purpose of this paper to weigh in on any one side of this conflict, the example shows the way in which youth exploit opportunities to experience a generic set of resilience enhancing processes and factors that may or may not be socially sanctioned. Clearly, it is not enough to examine an act of violence or self-harm outside the context in which it occurs (Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998).

ARGUMENT THREE: CHILDREN WHO THRIVE MAKE DO WITH WHAT THEY HAVE

Thus far, I have shown that resilience is an outcome that depends on the interface between individuals and their environments. I have argued that positive outcomes are culturally relative, dependent for their definition on community norms. I have also shown that the resources to promote and sustain resilience are themselves shaped by culture and context. Communities provide what makes sense to them at a particular point in time and convey through ideology and everyday practices what they value. My third argument is the corollary of

the first two. Children who thrive do so by making do with what they have available to secure (for themselves) a self-description, or narrative, as resilient.

Take, for example, the case of a child caught between two parents during a very conflicted divorce. Reading the cues, the child may choose to survive by clinging to one parent and rejecting the other, creating an alignment that may not be seen as healthy to outsiders, but reassures the child that someone loves her nonetheless. Cultural norms may further shape the child's decision about which parent to cling to. Such nuanced explanations for children's behaviour when under stress support a view of coping as temporally and culturally sensitive. Children simply do what they must do to survive with what they have to work with. Resilience results for a child who shows the capacity to *navigate* her way towards the health resources she needs and that are available, accessible, appropriate, and advocated by her caregivers. Resilience is also the outcome of her ability to *negotiate* to have those resources provided to her in ways that make sense culturally. Children who reject our interventions are not purposefully putting themselves in harm's way: they are more likely seeking resources elsewhere that make more sense to them and that bring them a better self-description as a healthy and competent youngster. Understood this way, resilience is not an end state for those with whom social workers work, but a description of a constantly fluctuating process of self-appraisal to attain success. This notion of navigation to health resources, and negotiation for those resources to be provided on the child's own terms, is part of an emerging discourse in the child development field. Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, and Anderson (2002) referred to this process as indicative of a child's "relative plasticity," a child's capacity to adapt to the demands of his or her environment:

Stress on relative plasticity is a foundation for an applied developmental science aimed at enhancing human development through strengthening the linkages between developing individuals and their changing family and community settings. From this applied developmental science perspective, healthy development involves positive change in the relation between a developing person—who is committed and able to contribute positively to self, family, and community—and a community's support in the

development of such a citizen. (p. 15)

The role of social work has historically been to ensure the provision of adequate developmental assets for children to cope well with their adversity. Understanding the person in context, however, means recognizing both the individual's degree of personal agency to secure health resources and the ability of resilient communities to provide them. Demonstration of children's personal agency can result in conflict between them and their providers of services who define what type of behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable.

Jake's Story

A 13-year-old boy, Jake, with whom I have been working clinically, has been moved between communities often during his lifetime. His mother was a street child who left home at age 11. Since then, she has used many social service systems, including services for drug and alcohol addictions, child welfare services, and educational upgrading. She has also spent time incarcerated. She is now in her mid 30s. She had one child other than Jake who was apprehended and placed for permanent adoption by child and family services. She has, however, managed to hang on to Jake who, despite her best efforts to protect him, was sexually abused by a pedophile in one of the communities where the family lived while Jake was still in elementary school. Though the abuse was dealt with briefly some years before, Jake was brought by his mother to counselling because she worries about his bullying and aggressive behaviour in junior high school and the three suspensions he received during the Fall term just before we met. Jake's mother believes his behaviour is related to his unresolved experience of sexual victimization. Jake refuses to discuss that part of his life.

As a compromise, Jake, his mother, and I created space for Jake to talk about his coping strategies: the bullying, suspensions, and denial of the abuse. Not surprisingly, Jake said he was pleased with how he copes. To him, three suspensions weren't a lot: "It's a problem for my mother but not really for me." Similarly, playing the bully has proven an effective way to keep other youth from picking on him.

"What are all the good things about being the bully?" I asked him.

That question proved pivotal to helping his mother and me understand his behaviour. Jake explained how other youth used to see him as someone they could push around. His fighting back, and becoming known as someone who would lash out, protects him against further abuse by his peers at school. Listening to Jake, one also has to wonder if his violence is his way of warning anyone, child or adult, who might hurt him again that he is not going to be their victim.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: FINDING SUBSTITUTE BEHAVIOURS

A more culturally- and contextually-embedded understanding of resilience can lead to focussed interventions that can help children like Jake, John, and Clara find substitutes for adaptive but problematic expressions of resilience. The goal becomes to identify intelligible alternatives that accrue the same benefits that children find through their disordered behaviour. These substitutes must bring with them the same experiences of personal power and well-being if they are to be seen by the child as worthy of exchange. Substitutes must also be as culturally and contextually relevant as the original solution the child found on his or her own (Ungar, 2006). And these substitutes must be realistically available and accessible. In Jake's case, the substitution was his ability to ignore problems and maintain control of his emotions. He admitted he used this strategy when it came to memories of his sexual abuse, but had not used it to deal with taunts he faced from other children at school. When Jake perceived having power as being able to control a situation, he agreed to change his strategy. As a result, he was able to avoid fights in most instances and to remain in school.

Substitution offers children alternative identity stories. These stories are as powerful as those that support a self-definition of success in anti-social ways. One way to characterize substitution is moving from "unconventional" pathways to resilience toward "conventional" pathways to resilience. Unconventional pathways might further be described by one or more of four D's that define problem children: Dangerous, Delinquent, Deviant, and Disordered. Conventional pathways might be described by one or more of four C's: Competent, Caring Contributors to their Communities. Figure 1 schematically

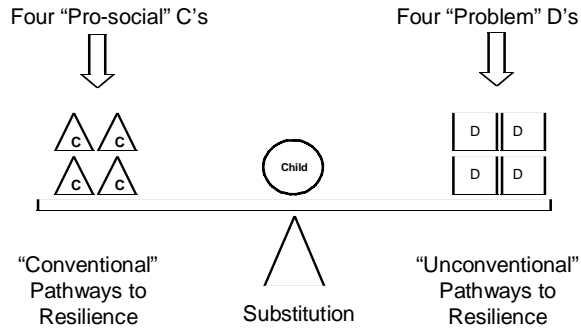


Figure 1. Conventional and unconventional pathways to resilience
 Source: Ungar, 2006. Reprinted with permission

represents this process of substitution. What social workers need to understand is that "problem" children are simply showing through one or more of the four D behaviours that they are successfully resilient. After all, for many of the most disadvantaged youth, the only community they can contribute to and feel successful in is one populated with other problem teens.

Clara, the girl introduced earlier who had taken on the dual roles of parent to her mother and gang leader, was not going to easily give up either self-description for a less powerful identity. Working together, we found a pathway to substitution in a classroom at school where Clara had connected with an English teacher, Mrs. G., who liked her but insisted she follow the rules. Mrs. G.'s compassionate expectation was something Clara said she liked and though she attended school irregularly, when she did attend, she always went to English class. It was in that class that Clara was told she had talent as a leader and reciprocated by being helpful to her teacher whenever she could. Such intelligible resolution of identity crises is often noted in the literature that reports on delinquent and problem youth. Studies of children who join gangs have shown they do so because membership brings with it a sense of belonging, protection, and material gain

(Hecht, 1998; Solis, 2003; Totten, 2000). Where a better resourced child may choose to avoid gang involvement, these children make their choices in the absence of other options.

By implication, this appreciation for children's navigations and negotiations as health-seeking fits within an emerging field of positive psychology, critical and postmodern social work, and advances in the field of resilience. Effective interventions that reflect an understanding of the hidden resilience described in this chapter may be guided by the following three principles:

- *Don't believe everything you read:* Findings suggest that different communities have very individual definitions of what makes children resilient. Although the bulk of the resilience literature has been generated in Western contexts, one cannot assume homogeneity across global populations. There is a need to ask more, and tell less, when it comes to understanding positive development under stress within specific contexts.
- *All aspects of resilience are not created equal:* As the case illustrations show, the aspects of resilience that are most protective influence outcomes differently depending on the culture and context in which they appear. A singular approach to intervention would be highly unlikely to succeed across all cultures, since children's social ecologies interact with the protective function of each aspect of resilience. As demonstrated in this chapter's example, even something like social justice or relationships with adults are highly contextually determined and influence well-being in ways that may or may not be normative across cultures.
- *Pathways to resilience are a many splendored thing:* The constellation of factors that interact in the lives of resilient children have been shown to be complex. There must necessarily be appreciation shown for both homogeneity and heterogeneity in coping strategies across populations.

These practice principles are meant only as a guide to help social workers explore the possibility of multiple truth claims by clients who themselves live in many different contexts. Honouring this plu-

rality is essential for a sensitive practice that is respectful of diversity among at-risk children and families who seek to survive in any way possible. Understanding resilience as an outcome demands attending carefully to the specific setting in which behaviour is manifested. It is incumbent on those helping to inquire carefully as to the meaning of the behaviour and assume its intelligibility to those living with adversity.

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