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Enhancing Wellbeing in Social Work Students: Building Resilience in the Next Generation

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The need for social workers to be resilient is widely emphasised. Although enhancing resilience in social work trainees presents a challenge to educators, they are nonetheless responsible for developing professionals who are able to cope with the emotional demands of the job. This paper argues that building resilience in the future workforce should be a key element of social work education. However, as little is known about the competencies and support structures that underpin resilience or the extent to which resilience protects the wellbeing of trainees, an evidence-based approach is required to inform curriculum development.

Recent research conducted by the authors of this paper has highlighted the protective nature of resilience in social work trainees. Emotional intelligence and associated competencies, such as reflective ability, aspects of empathy and social confidence, were found to be key predictors of this important quality. The important role played by social support from various sources was also emphasised. The present paper summarises this research, and presents interventions based on the findings that have the potential to promote resilience and wellbeing in social work trainees. Also considered are ways in which the curriculum might be further enhanced to provide trainees with an internal ‘tool-box’ of strategies that will help them manage their wellbeing more effectively in their future career.

Keywords: Stress; Resilience; Reflection; Empathy; Emotional Intelligence Social Workers

Introduction

Resilience is a term that has become widely used in recent years. To be resilient is to be able to overcome stressors or withstand negative life events and, not only recover from such experiences, but also find personal meaning in them (Klohen, 1996; Youssef and

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Luthans, 2007). It has recently been defined by Pooley and Cohen (2010, p. 34) as 'the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges'. Research in the field has tended to focus on the protective nature of resilience in children (e.g. Haggerty *et al.*, 1996), or in adults who have experienced traumatic events (e.g. Bonanno, 2004). More recently, however, the role played by resilience in protecting employees from the negative impact of work-related stress has been highlighted (Howard, 2008). The concept of resilience might help to explain why some individuals who experience high levels of stress at work fail to burn out, and may even thrive, enabling them to manage future challenges more effectively. It has been suggested that resilience may be a particularly important quality for social work practitioners, as it may help them adapt positively to stressful working situations and enhance their professional growth (Morrison, 2007; Collins, 2008). This perspective reflects a move towards a more positive psychology that aims to identify the factors that underpin human flourishing and fulfilment, rather than merely document the existence of stressors and strains (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998; Seligman, 2003; Froman, 2009). This positive, strengths-focused approach is currently under-represented in the social work literature.

Social work is a rewarding but stressful occupation (Rose, 2003; Coffey *et al.*, 2004; Collins, 2008). The need for social workers to develop the resilience required to protect their own wellbeing and provide high quality care to service users is recognised by academics and social work educators (Morrison, 2007; Ruch, 2007). Lord Laming's recent report on *The Protection of Children in England* also argued that a key role of initial social work training is to help students 'develop the emotional resilience to manage the challenges they will face in dealing with potentially difficult families' (Laming, 2009a, p. 52). The United Kingdom (UK) Social Work Task Force report (DOH, 2009) has also recognised the need for social workers to possess '... a particular mix of analytical skills, insight, common sense, confidence, resilience, empathy and use of authority' (p. 16). Nonetheless, the Task Force expressed serious concerns that many social workers are not sufficiently resilient to survive in their future career. In order to address these concerns, social work educators in the UK have been tasked with reviewing the criteria governing entry requirements to courses and with developing the curriculum, in order to enhance the resilience of trainees.

Concerns raised in the UK about the need to enhance social workers' resilience have been echoed by researchers and educators in other countries (NASW, 2006; Healey and Meagher, 2007). Nonetheless, the research and commentaries that have been published in the area typically emphasise the importance of identifying resilience in clients in order to facilitate their development, rather than examining the role played by resilience in enhancing the wellbeing and performance of social workers themselves.

In order to inform the development of the social work curriculum, an understanding of the factors that underpin resilience and the mechanisms by which it might promote wellbeing in trainees is required. It should be emphasised, however, that social work employers have a duty of care to protect the wellbeing of their workforce and workplace stressors should be managed at source. Nonetheless, it is

necessary for individual employees to take some responsibility for managing their own wellbeing in a job that can often be intrinsically stressful.

This paper initially provides some background information about resilience and introduces the competencies that might underpin this quality. We then summarise the findings of a study that has systematically examined the role played by several of these competencies (i.e. emotional intelligence, reflective ability, social confidence and empathy) in predicting resilience and psychological wellbeing in social work trainees. The paper subsequently considers how these findings might be used to inform the social work curriculum to help social work trainees to enhance their resilience, their wellbeing, their personal effectiveness and their employability. Although this research was conducted in the UK, the issues considered are relevant to social work educators more widely, as stress in social workers appears to be an international problem (Coyle *et al.*, 2005; Lloyd *et al.*, 2005).

Context

It is widely recognised that social work is a complex and emotionally demanding profession, requiring the social worker to manage his/her own emotions effectively and safeguard the wellbeing of others (Howe, 2008). Studies conducted in several countries have found high levels of stress and burnout amongst social workers (Barak *et al.*, 2001; Lloyd *et al.*, 2002; Stalker *et al.*, 2007). A report recently published in the UK found that, in the previous five years, 20% of the country's 76,000 social workers had been signed off work for more than 20 consecutive days due to conditions such as stress or anxiety (*The Observer*, 2008). Moreover, at the time of writing this paper, the time in post of a newly qualified social worker is approximately eight years, considerably less than people working in similar professions (Curtis *et al.*, 2009). The high level of stress experienced by social workers has been found to contribute to the growing retention problems within the profession in the UK (Eborall and Garmeson, 2001; Tham, 2007; LGA, 2009). Research findings indicate that social work trainees, as well as qualified staff, experience high levels of stress that they are frequently reluctant to disclose to practice educators and tutors (Maidment, 2003; Barlow and Hall, 2007).

Studies have examined the aspects of the social work role that are perceived to be most stressful, and their contributions to burnout and other negative outcomes (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 1991; Lloyd *et al.*, 2002; Coffey *et al.*, 2004). Little research has, however, investigated how stress might be alleviated in social workers, or examined why some people are better able to cope with the demands of the work than others (Coyle *et al.*, 2005). Research studies conducted with families and communities in general have considered the social and psychological characteristics that underpin resilience (Muller *et al.*, 2009). Nonetheless, although studies of working populations emphasise the role played by individual differences in predicting workers' vulnerability to stress-related illness and burnout (e.g. Gustaffason *et al.*, 2010), the factors that underpin resilience in this context have been little examined. Insight is vital in order to help trainee and early career social workers develop the personal skills and coping strategies required to enhance their resilience and wellbeing.

Resilience

It has been argued that focusing on salutogenic (or health-enhancing) rather than pathogenic (or disease-enhancing) factors will be more successful in promoting wellbeing in various life contexts; this approach attempts to gain insight into what makes us happy, enjoy life and thrive rather than merely survive (Seligman, 2003). Resilience is a construct that reflects this positive psychological approach. It is a complex and multi-dimensional factor referring to an individual's ability to manage the demands of life without experiencing long-term adverse effects (Klohen, 1996). Although there is evidence that resilience has a genetic component and is rooted in childhood experiences (Buckner *et al.*, 2003; Muller *et al.*, 2009), research findings suggest that it can be enhanced later in life (e.g. Edward *et al.*, 2009).

It has increasingly been recognised that resilience is an important quality within the workplace, as it may help employees deal with stress more effectively. The resilience construct is considered to be particularly relevant to those who work in complex and emotionally challenging contexts, such as social workers (Collins, 2008; Howe, 2008).

The Predictors of Resilience in Social Work Students and its Relationship with Wellbeing

The need for insight into the mechanisms underlying resilience has been recognised (e.g. Fisk and Dionisi, 2010) but little is yet known about this issue in workplace settings. A study recently conducted by the authors aimed to identify the emotional and social competencies that underpin resilience in trainee social workers, and the extent to which resilience is related to psychological wellbeing. The competencies examined were emotional intelligence, reflective ability, empathy and social competence. These variables were selected on the basis of previous research findings that highlight their potential role as stress-resistance resources, and their relevance to the social worker role (Collins, 2008; Howe, 2008).

A sample of 240 students studying for an under-graduate social work degree qualification (82% female) with a mean age of 33.7 ($SD = 9.04$) completed a range of online questionnaires. Of the sample, 69% were first-year students and the remaining 39% were in their second year. The students were invited to take part in the study by email, and those willing to do so completed an online questionnaire at their own convenience. The study was cleared by the University's Ethics Committee and responses were anonymised. As there was considerable variation in the demographic characteristics of the sample, the lack of statistical power meant that differences in age, gender, ethnicity and level could not be examined. Future research with a stratified sample might investigate the role played by these individual difference factors in predicting levels of resilience and the factors that underpin this.

A series of validated scales was utilised to measure the study variables. *Emotional intelligence* was measured using a 33-item scale developed by Schutte *et al.* (1997). This assesses the perception, appraisal and expression of emotion, emotional facilitation of thinking, understanding, analysis and employment of emotional knowledge, and the

regulation of emotion. *Reflective ability* was assessed by a 23-item scale developed by Aukes *et al.* (2007), encompassing self-reflection, empathetic reflection and reflective communication. *Empathy* was measured using a 21-item scale adapted from a measure developed by Davis (1983). This scale has three dimensions: perspective taking, empathetic concern and personal distress. Feelings of *competence in social situations* were assessed using a 10-item scale developed by Sarason *et al.* (1985). *Resilience* was measured by a 15-item scale developed by Wagnild and Young (1993). The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg and Williams, 1988) was utilised to measure levels of *psychological distress*.

Analysis of the data revealed that social work students who were more emotionally intelligent, who were more socially confident and reflective, and whose reflective abilities were more developed, tended to be more resilient to stress (all correlations were significant at $p < 0.001$). Trainee social workers who were more resilient were also more psychologically healthy ($p < 0.001$). The study also highlighted a strong need for interventions to enhance resilience and wellbeing in this context, as high levels of psychological distress compared to community and occupational norms were found amongst the trainee social workers that were surveyed.

In order to enhance resilience in the profession, the findings of our study suggest that social work training should focus more explicitly on developing the skills that underpin this vital quality. The need to recruit candidates that can already possess these skills to a certain degree is also evident. Each of these competencies will now be discussed with reference to other relevant literature. Interventions that have been developed by the authors of this paper designed to enhance resilience will subsequently be outlined, and ways in which the social work curriculum might be further developed to enhance these qualities examined.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence has been defined as 'being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathise and to hope' (Goleman, 1996, p. 34). Previous research has highlighted relationships between emotional intelligence and a wide range of outcomes that are linked with resilience such as including physical and psychological health, satisfaction with work and life in general, and interpersonal and career success (Salovey *et al.*, 2002; Carmeli and Josman, 2006). There is also evidence that people who are more emotionally intelligent are more flexible, self-confident and co-operative, utilise more adaptive coping strategies, and have more advanced problem solving and decision-making abilities (George, 2000).

It has recently been argued that emotional intelligence is a key competence for social workers, as it is likely to help them manage their own emotions and those of others more effectively (Howe, 2008). Well developed emotion regulation skills are also likely to buffer the negative impact of emotional labour that is a particular cause of stress and burnout in the social work profession (Nelson and Merighi, 2003). Our research utilised a holistic model of emotional intelligence developed by Schutte *et al.* (1997)

which comprises four elements: (a) perception, appraisal and expression of emotion; (b) emotional facilitation of thinking; (c) the understanding, analysis and utilisation of emotional knowledge; and (d) the regulation of emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Emotional intelligence was one of the strongest predictors of resilience in social work students, suggesting that effective emotion management skills are likely to help social workers withstand the stressful nature of the job.

Reflective Ability

Reflective ability is considered to be a key competency for social workers as it underlies the acquisition, maintenance and enhancement of professional development (Collins, 2008; Ruch, 2009). Nonetheless, the use of reflective practice has been frequently criticised due to a lack of empirical evidence for its effectiveness (Ixer, 1999; Taylor, 2003; Kinsella, 2009). A study of social workers conducted by Graham and Shier (2010) has recently highlighted the positive impact of reflection, as the ability to utilise reflective practice was strongly associated with happiness. Our study also found reflective ability to be an important predictor of wellbeing, in that trainee social workers who are better able to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and beliefs; who are more able to consider the position of other people; and who can use their reflective abilities to communicate effectively with others tended to be more resilient to stress and to be more psychologically healthy.

Bolton (2009) has argued that reflective and reflexive practice, where doubts, values, assumptions and habitual actions are voiced and questioned during supervision, helps social workers make sense of complex situations and enhances their practice. The findings of our study also highlight the value of reflection as a self-protective mechanism. It has been noted that social workers frequently attempt to cope with anxiety engendered by complex practice by adopting a task and target oriented strategy, rather than a more emotion focused approach (Ruch, 2009). Although it has been argued that reflection should not be utilised primarily as a therapeutic tool (Fook and Gardner, 2007), failing to acknowledge and address the emotional demands of social work can result in emotional exhaustion, and also have a negative impact on service users (Cooper, 2005).

Although reflective practice can help social workers manage stress and enhance resilience and performance, it has been recognised that ever-increasing workloads are likely to undermine opportunities to use this technique (Laming, 2009b). It is, therefore, vital to emphasise the importance of reflection at an early stage in social work training to help students identify 'reflective spaces' (Ruch, 2009). Interventions designed to develop reflective skills in social work trainees should also highlight the protective functions; more specifically, it is important for educators to recognise the importance of the different facets of reflective ability identified in our research and explicitly aim to develop these abilities.

Empathy

The findings of our study emphasised the important role played by empathy in underpinning resilience and psychological wellbeing. Empathy is a core element of

helping relationships; it has strong positive effects on service users' physical, mental and social wellbeing, and also engenders feelings of personal accomplishment in helping professionals (Morrison, 2007). Empathy is simply understood as the ability to adopt the perspective of other people: in other words, to be able to 'walk in their shoes' (Hogan, 1969). In recognition that a more mature conceptualisation of empathy is required to underpin education and practice in health and social care (Kunyk and Olson, 2001), our study utilised a model developed by Davis (1983) that encompasses several dimensions: (a) perspective taking (spontaneous attempts to adopt the perspectives of other people); (b) empathic concern (feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others); and (c) personal distress (feelings of anxiety and discomfort resulting from the negative experiences of others). Our findings suggest that this holistic conceptualisation is likely to be more useful in guiding interventions in social work settings than previous approaches, as moderate levels of empathetic concern and the ability to adopt the perspective of service users appear to enhance resilience to stress, whereas empathetic distress tends to diminish it leading to low levels of wellbeing more generally. These findings reflect previous research in occupational psychology indicating that, whilst a certain degree of empathy is beneficial for wellbeing, over-empathising with service users is likely to lead to over-involvement and burnout (Koeske and Kelly, 1995).

Our findings highlight the need to raise awareness at an early stage of social work training that, although a certain degree of empathy is needed in order to acknowledge and accept what their clients think and feel, clear emotional boundaries are required. This is to ensure that healthy empathetic concern does not lead to empathetic distress, which is likely to have negative implications for their clients as well as themselves. Nonetheless, it has been recognised that emotional boundaries should be semi-permeable, i.e. sufficiently flexible to allow emotions and feelings to flow in and out (GSCC, 2009). Several ways in which empathy might be constructively enhanced in health and social care settings have been suggested, such as mindfulness and art and drama (Nerdrum, 1997; Gerdes *et al.*, 2010).

Social Competencies

Like other professionals, social workers require sound communication skills, self-confidence and the ability to be assertive when required. The importance of social competence in underlying resilience and enhancing wellbeing in social work students was highlighted in our study. Morrison (2005) has observed that it is often assumed that people entering the helping professions already possess highly developed social competencies, so the formal curriculum tends not to focus on developing these skills further. Nonetheless, as our study found considerable variation in the level of social confidence amongst social work trainees, some formal input is required to enhance social competence and foster feelings of confidence in social settings. Although effective communication with service users from different backgrounds and multi-disciplinary groups requires well developed social skills, they are also needed to develop effective social support networks amongst peers,

family and friends. A body of research has also found that social support is one of the most effective buffers against stress (Sarason *et al.*, 1985). It is therefore important to help trainees identify potential sources of support from their personal and professional networks.

Curriculum Developments to Enhance Resilience and Emotional Intelligence

This paper has argued that an understanding of the factors that underpin resilience is vital in order to safeguard the wellbeing of social workers and service users. Insight into these factors gained from our research can inform the development of the social work curriculum to help enhance resilience amongst trainees and may also influence the development of recruitment strategies. We argue that the importance of resilience to work-related wellbeing should be emphasised, and the development of effective emotion management, reflective and social skills given greater prominence. The findings of the research presented in this paper have also informed the development of a series of 'Wellbeing Days' designed for social work trainees. These events have three aims: (a) to foster a recognition of the importance of self-care and resilience to current and future wellbeing and job performance; (b) to familiarise students with a range of techniques which have the potential to enhance resilience and wellbeing; and (c) to consider ways by which resilience might be developed that are congruent with students' individual needs and preferences.

These aims are achieved by providing students with a range of carefully selected interactive workshops facilitated by subject specialists. The Wellbeing Days are designed to raise awareness of the importance of resilience and self-knowledge more generally. Workshops cover 'core' stress management skills such as relaxation and time management relaxation skills, as well as sessions that build on our research findings by aiming to enhance underlying competencies such as emotional intelligence, reflective practice, social awareness and empathetic skills. The following topics are included:

- mindfulness;
- thinking skills (Cognitive Behavioural Techniques);
- utilising supervision for reflective practice;
- peer coaching to enhance social support and promote wellbeing; and
- self-awareness and action planning.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness refers to moment-to-moment awareness, or paying attention to the moment without judgement. The role played by mindfulness training in managing psychological problems and fostering resilience has been emphasised (Goleman and Cherniss, 2001). More specifically, mindfulness has been found to be an effective stress management tool for social workers (Irving *et al.*, 2009; Ying, 2009), and it has been found to help trainees cope more effectively with their own emotional states and the

highly charged emotional states of others (Birnbaum, 2008). It has recently been suggested that mindfulness may also be an effective way to enhance emotional intelligence in occupational and educational settings (Ciarrochi and Godsell, 2006). The potential utility of mindfulness-based approaches in aiding the training and professional practice of health and social care professionals has been recognised as they can help facilitate active listening, promote self-awareness and enhance critical reflection (Johns, 2006; Lynn, 2010).

The workshop was designed to introduce social work students to the basic principles of mindfulness and how it can be used to enhance personal wellbeing and professional practice. During the session, students were encouraged to develop the necessary self-awareness to recognise early signs of stress. Students practised a series of exercises to illustrate the benefits of mindfulness, and were given tips for increasing attentional control during the working day. At the end of the session, participants were provided with written material that explained how the techniques can be used to combat stress and manage their emotional states more effectively.

Peer Coaching

Peer coaching is based on a collaborative relationship that aims to facilitate the development of skills and performance through feedback, reflection and self-directed learning (Green *et al.*, 2007). Peer coaching is a particularly appropriate technique to enhance resilience as it can help individuals identify personal strengths as well as perceived weaknesses, and promote self-awareness and facilitate reflection on practice (Goleman and Cherniss, 2001; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2005). The peer coach, as well as the recipient of coaching, has been found to benefit in terms of enhanced social-emotional development and improved interpersonal skills such as active listening, questioning and probing (Ladyshevsky, 2006).

The use of peer coaching techniques has recently been found to help students manage stress and cope with personal problems more effectively (Short *et al.*, 2010). Despite its clear relevance to this context, however, the use and impact of peer coaching in social work settings has not been systematically examined. Thompson and Thompson (2008) have argued that coaching can create opportunities for 'dyadic reflective space' where workers are given the support and opportunity to explore their experiences and learning in order to enhance their reflective practice. These techniques also have the potential to help social work students make positive changes in their lives by developing clear and realistic action plans, and encouraging reflection upon previously unrecognised skills and resources (such as social support) that may facilitate the achievement of these goals (Brockbank and McGill, 1998). We also believe that peer coaching techniques could be used to foster resilience in social workers, as well as enhance the competencies that have been found to underpin this quality.

In the Wellbeing Days, social work students were introduced to the concept of peer coaching and practised some key techniques designed to enhance resilience. Reflecting the strengths-focused perspective adopted in the research programme, the workshop

explored personal strengths as well as areas for improvement. One exercise required students to adopt a solution-focused, rather than a problem-focused, approach to difficulties they may encounter in their personal life and their professional practice. A further exercise asked students to identify 'Sparkling Moments': times in their life when they felt particularly successful and satisfied. The peer coach and coachee subsequently explored what made this situation so satisfying, and considered how such opportunities could be maximised in the future.

Reflective Supervision

The importance of supervision in enhancing emotion management skills in social workers has been recognised by Collins (2008, p. 1182), who argues that 'regular extensive supervision, better informed and more sensitive supervision is likely to provide more effective support for workers'. As discussed earlier in this paper, social work trainees can experience high levels of anxiety and fear of complexity. The importance of reflective skills in building resilience and protecting wellbeing was highlighted in our research. As well as helping social workers manage work-related stress, reflective supervision can help create space for emotional thinking and reflection upon ethical and practice-related issues, providing conditions in which practitioners can be nurtured (Gibbs, 2001; Banks, 2006; Ruch, 2009). During reflective supervision, students have a safe environment to explore and analyse their practice, together with its emotional impact on themselves and on service users.

The workshop on reflective supervision was designed to enhance students' understanding of the links between reflective practice as a theory, and as a tool that can be utilised to enhance wellbeing and improve practice. More specifically, trainees were encouraged to consider the advantages of group supervision in preparation for the learning sets that they will be experiencing during their final year of study. Many students report feeling anxious about this aspect of the curriculum, as they fear that their practice will be scrutinised and judged negatively. Using practice examples, the workshop introduced the concept of double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978), where students are not only able to reflect on their practice by adjusting their actions and behaviours to fixed norms and assumptions, but also have the ability to question normalised or habitual modes of action. Students were also given practice examples to illustrate how supervision can encourage reflective thinking, and subsequently encouraged to identify examples from their own practice and discuss these reflectively in small groups.

Thinking Skills (Cognitive Behavioural Techniques)

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is underpinned by the notion that how we think about events has a powerful influence on how we feel about them, and that our thoughts and beliefs are not facts but open to interpretation. CBT techniques can help people develop alternative strategies to manage emotional or behavioural problems by challenging the ways in which they think about situations (Beck, 1995). Research

indicates that interventions based on CBT principles can help health and social care professionals manage negative emotions, reduce emotional distress and build self-confidence (Brunero *et al.*, 2008; Maguire *et al.*, 2010). Although anxiety, worry and self-blame seem to be commonplace amongst social work students (Barlow and Hall, 2007), little is known about whether CBT techniques may help them manage distress and promote resilience. By utilising these principles, it is envisaged that new insight into situations can be gained by challenging negative ideas and beliefs that may cause difficulties in practice.

The CBT workshop introduced trainees to the basic principles of CBT and how it can be used to enhance resilience. The types of thinking errors that people commonly experience were identified via a series of exercises, together with the ways in which 'unhelpful' thinking can affect the way we feel. Also examined was how negative and worrisome thoughts can be challenged in order to help manage anxiety, enhance problem-solving abilities, and help us deal more effectively with complexity and change. Using a series of vignettes, students were encouraged to develop strategies to help them manage emotional or behavioural problems which otherwise may be ignored, deflected or worried about.

Self-awareness and Action Planning

Our research emphasised the importance of self-awareness in enhancing resilience and promoting wellbeing. Self-knowledge is a key factor in stress management that encompasses all of the qualities that we found underpinned resilience. Gaining insight into what we do (or don't do) that make things better or worse during stressful times is the first step in enhancing wellbeing. In this workshop, trainees considered the ways in which they respond to stress, physically, psychologically and behaviourally. In line with Pooley and Cohen's conceptualisation of resilience (2010), they were also encouraged to identify the underlying causes of stress in their lives using primary and secondary appraisal techniques (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). Primary appraisal is made when the individual makes a conscious evaluation of an event as a harm or a loss, a threat, or a challenge. Secondary appraisal takes place when the individual asks himself or herself 'What can I do about it?' by evaluating the internal and external resources available to them that have the potential to buffer stress reactions (Bakker *et al.*, 2004). The development of action plans and goal setting to implement change were also practised, as the importance of developing realistic goals that were not too easy or too difficult to achieve was emphasised.

A Work in Progress: The Story So Far

Over the last two years, more than 200 social work students have attended the Wellbeing Days. Preliminary analysis of the evaluation indicates that students found the sessions to be informative and helpful, and they believed they had acquired new skills. Further evaluation needs to be undertaken to assess the extent to which this learning and skill development has been translated into practice. Further research will

focus on how the techniques introduced in the workshops may have informed the stress management strategies utilised by our students' post qualification, and the implications for their wellbeing and job performance over the longer term.

Carpenter (2005) has developed a number of measures designed to evaluate the effects of learning in social work education and it is anticipated that longitudinal research will utilise these to examine the impact of our intervention. Of particular interest will be to examine whether changes in social workers' levels of resilience and wellbeing are translated into benefits for service users.

Students were unanimous in their opinions that greater emphasis should be placed on the importance of resilience to social work practice at an earlier stage in their training, together with ways by which this vital quality might be enhanced. We are considering how best to integrate resilience awareness and training into the curriculum at different levels of study. As considerable variation was found in the competencies found to underpin resilience, we are exploring ways by which an 'individualised' approach might be utilised, where trainees who can demonstrate specific competencies at an optimum level can be supported, whilst those whose skills are less developed can be provided with the support mechanisms required to enhance them.

There is strong evidence that people who are more flexible and less rigid in the coping responses they utilise are more resistant to stress and more psychologically and physically healthy (Lester *et al.*, 1994). It has also been argued that the strategies and coping mechanisms that employees habitually utilise to manage the stress in their lives may not necessarily be beneficial (Morrison, 2005). For example, an individual who is prone to excessively ruminate about difficulties may seek out further opportunities to reflect and become stuck in this pattern, rather than use alternative problem-focused strategies such as CBT or action planning. Interventions should, therefore, be developed that bear these risks in mind. Ways by which favoured coping strategies, as well as coping flexibility, can be accurately diagnosed are currently being considered. Later intakes of trainees will be encouraged to pursue skills and competencies that are currently under-developed rather than seek out methods to enhance competencies that are already dominant.

Conclusion

The importance of social workers being sufficiently resilient to manage work-related stress effectively is self-evident, but little consideration has been given to what resilience actually means, or how it can be developed. The introduction of evidence-based interventions to enhance resilience in trainee social workers is essential in order to develop a new generation of professionals who can meet the demands of an increasingly stressful career.

The findings of the research reported in this paper have implications for the recruitment of trainee social workers, as well as their development. Indeed, the importance of resilience has been recognised in a recent UK recruitment programme that has recently introduced some basic questions regarding resilience in initial recruitment processes (CWDC, 2010). The extent to which this process results in more

resilient social workers should be evaluated. As well as enhancing the protective factors during training, it may also be appropriate to develop more sophisticated testing at interview in order to identify students who have the qualities that underpin resilience at an early stage in their career. Whether applicants' levels of resilience, together with their potential for personal growth, are valid predictors of subsequent wellbeing, job performance and retention should be considered. Moreover, the extent to which resilience, and the competencies that underlie this quality, are amenable to development in social work education should be examined. Although potentially relevant to social workers more generally, it must be acknowledged that the competencies found to underlie resilience, together with the techniques we recommend to enhance it, may be culturally specific to the UK. Further research should be undertaken to validate these findings in other cultural contexts.

The approach to enhancing the wellbeing of social workers that is advocated in this paper focuses on the development of personal competencies. It should be acknowledged, however, that interventions that aim to enhance individual coping abilities without recognising and addressing the structural causes of stress are likely to fail. Employers' responsibilities for safeguarding the wellbeing of their staff are clear (Health and Safety Executive, 2009). Even the most resilient and emotionally intelligent social workers will be unable to manage, let alone thrive in, working conditions that are truly pathogenic. Nonetheless, unless social work trainees are provided with an internal 'tool-box' of coping strategies early in their career they will be unable to manage the intrinsic demands of the job, leaving them vulnerable to stress and burnout. A more positive psychological approach, such as that advocated in our research, may enable social workers to be better prepared for the realities of their chosen career.

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