Resilience – an attachment/psychoanalytic perspective

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Do you have something for the human condition?
Plan of Talk

• General remarks and definitions
• Scientific evidence
• Clinical examples
• Conclusions
Resilience

‘Patterns of *positive adaptation* in the context of significant *risk or adversity*’
...individual difference in people’s responses to environmental hazard....the experience of stress or adversity sometimes strengthens resistance to later stress—so-called “steeling” effect.
‘What is this life...’
Leisure

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?—
No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows:
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass:
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night:
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance:
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began?
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
Autobiography of a Super-tramp

- Father dies when he is 3
- Mother remarries
- 3 children including WHD handed over to grandparents
- Grandmother loving, then dies.
- Childhood delinquency and stealing
- Love of sport and reading
WH Davies continued

• Tramps USA and UK 7 years
• Loses leg on way to Klondike goldrush
• Settles in hostel in S London
• Writes and reads for two years;
• Eventually taken up by GBS and literati
• Avoids women until late marriage (aet 50) to pregnant prostitute Emma.
Resilience features

• Grandmother’s love and legacy
• Athletic prowess
• ‘Cussedness’, independence, self-efficacy
• Companionability
• Intelligence: libraries and reading
• ‘Turning point’ experiences: losing leg; eventually finding a patron
Hauser & Allen’s list

- self-reflection
- agency
- self-complexity
- persistence and ambition
- self-esteem
- coherent narratives

Neglects relational and contextual perspectives
WHD & mentalising

• Story of brother and ‘watching the fish’

• Ability to laugh at his own early literary efforts and aspirations

• Narrative coherence
Role of defences and avoidance

• Almost no mention of sex or women throughout A o S-T

• Leaving after his amputation, the matron kisses him:

• ‘I felt my voice gone and and my throat in the clutches of something new to my experience’
A fleeting passion

Thou shalt not laugh, thou shalt not romp, Let's grimly kiss with bated breath; As quietly and solemnly As Life when it is kissing Death. Now in the silence of the grave, My hand is squeezing that soft breast; While thou dost in such passion lie, It mocks me with its look of rest. But when the morning comes at last, And we must part, our passions cold, You'll think of some new feather, scarf To buy with my small piece of gold; And I'll be dreaming of green lanes, Where little things with beating hearts Hold shining eyes between the leaves, Till men with horses pass, and carts.
Leprosy analgesia/analogue
Why psychoanalysis (psa) has neglected resilience?

• R entails robust defenses; psa is about *undoing* defenses

• *Getting to* psa entails a degree of pre-existing R, so may be taken for granted

• Psa’s emphasis on ‘internal’ as opposed to external adventitious trauma (c.f. Freud’s traumatic childhood)
Why psa not interested....?

• R theory is a ‘positive psychology’ approach; psa emphasises negatives, emphasis on trauma/victim

• Psa reifies the individual; contemporary R theory sees R as a *process* involving family, society, contingency

• Psa is implicitly normative; R requires cultural perspectives
Exceptions

• Bettelheim & Frankel: Dachau & Buchenwald: role of belief systems & meaning
• Levine: contra-Freud, animal models suggest ‘stress innoculation’
• Parens: Holocaust survival: role of chance; ‘what does no kill me makes me stronger’ (Nietzsche); ‘best worst’
• Hauser & Allen: qualitative studies of survivors
What does research tell us?

• Steeling
• G x e
• Mentalising
• Role of wider environment
• New beginnings and fresh start events
• Developmental models
1: ‘Steeling’

- Levine’s original experiments: rats given brief shocks: *more* exploratory than those without
- Brief periods of separation in rats and monkeys – ‘stress inoculation’ (SI):
  - more exploration
  - better performance on tasks involving behavioural inhibition
How might SI work?

• Brief separations stimulate more ‘high arched licking and grooming’ in rat mums
• Parental *neglect* in monkeys abolishes the SI response
• ? SI: enhances regulatory capacities in a separation/reunion/soothing cycle
Steeling continued

• SI monkeys: increased ventromedical neocortex volume

• In humans ventromedial prefrontal size predicts decreased impulsivity and retention of learned fear extinction
Self-sufficiency v problem shared...

- Mediated by *down-regulation* of impulses from the amygdala
- fMRI hand-holding studies (Coan)
Tronic: everyday stress resilience hypothesis

- Healthy normal infants stressed 11% of time,
- Each episode lasts 3 mins, ends with self-regulation or other regulation
- Continuously repeated mismatch-repair cycle
- Transitions: infant loses complexity and coherence until new organization emerges.
Dyadic synchrony – or partially contingent mirroring

- Dyadic regulatory system: infant’s regulatory capacity scaffolded by external regulator – typically mother.

- Mothers allow a certain amount of stress: sensitivity at 3 mo predicts lower basal cortical levels at 12 mo.

- Strong, but not perfect, behavioral measures of synchrony and matching (c.f. Beebe & Winnicott): play as resilience-enhancement
Duration of Looking at Self During Three Phases of Modified Still Face Procedure

- Insecure (n=47)
- Secure (n=92)

F(interaction) = 6.90, df = 2,137, p < .0001

(Gergely, Fonagy, Koos, et al., 2004)
Duration of Looking at Self During Three Phases of Modified Still Face Procedure

\[ F(\text{interaction}) = 12.00, \text{df} = 2,137, p < .0001 \]

(Gergely, Fonagy, Koos, et al., 2004)
Tronic on mother-infant repair

• “The miscoordinated state is ... a normal interactive communicative error”
• “successful reparations ... are associated with positive affective states”
• “In normal dyads, interactive errors are quickly repaired ....
• Normal interaction is a process of reparation”
2: G x E

- Suomi: humans (and rhesus monkeys) are ‘weed species’
- Huge genetic variability/multiple polymorphisms
- May account for evolutionary success – can adapt to a wide variety of environments
- ? Population genetics perspective means there will always be pool of less well adapted – hence need for healthcare/psychotherapy etc
Caspi et al

- 5-HTT polymorphism
- Ss, sl, ll
- Predicts likelihood of developing depression in response to childhood adversity
**G x e**

![Chart showing the percent of people diagnosed with depression in relation to the number of stressful life events experienced, comparing two genotypes: "s/s" and "I/I". The chart indicates a higher percentage of people with the "s/s" genotype experiencing depression as the number of stressful life events increases.](image-url)
Suomi data

• Peer-reared monkeys: s allele more alcohol than l alleles
• Maternal-reared: s-ers less alcohol than l counterparts
• Thus s allele significant risk factor for excessive alcohol consumption if PO-reared, but protective for MP-reared
• N.b. like humans, but not other monkey species, much face-to-face contact in rhesus
Belsky hypothesis

• Need to think in terms of *plasticity* not vulnerability

• In favourable environments plasticity genes confer advantage; in adversity disadvantage

• Resilience: relatively protected in -ive environments: maybe less open to change when environment +ive
3: Reflexive function/mentalising

- Classic Steele, Steele & Fonagy study (1991)
- AAI for parents; infants SS score 18/mo later
- Parental Reflexive Function (RF) correlates infant security, especially in context of adversity (c.f. adoption)
- 100% mothers with adversity but high RF had secure infants; only 1/17 mothers with low RF had secure infants
RF morphs to mentalising

• RF enhances: planning effectively, eliciting partner support, making good use of resources.

• Survival *as* a child enables survival *with* a child: pulling back from conflict, detaching from high-intensity affect, being compliant, humour detachment, self-awareness
Limits to resilience: Alan Sroufe

There is reason to doubt that children are infinitely resilient. Our biology may not be able to adapt to any and all changes in societal conditions proceeding at any rate. ... becoming manifest only when the individual attempts to establish intimate adult relationships or engage in parenting. But there will be consequences.
4: Ungar’s critique: deconstructing resilience: ecological perspective

- R responsibility wrongly placed on the victim of toxic environments
- ‘Match’ between degree of risk and environmental support is what matters for vulnerable children
- The more the disadvantage the greater the impact of interventions (e.g. adoption).
‘Non-normative substitute adaptations’ (hidden resilience)

Cfed competent youths with no adversity, enhanced adjustment in high-adversity families:

• low levels of affective responsiveness to others’ feelings
• low acceptance of others’ affect expressiveness
• Minimal engagement and emotional involvement with their primary caregivers
• Better to be a gang leader than to go to college
Ungar: navigation/negotiation model

• Transactional model; thus resilience both
• a) Capacity of individuals to *navigate* to psychological social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being (*self-soothing*)
• b) and individually and collectively to *negotiate* for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (i.e. *ask for help when needed*)
Mikulincer and Shaver

- Role of subliminal messages from the environment shapes attachment dispositions
- With subliminal secure attachment messages v neutral, insecure subjects’ narratives indistinguishable from secure subjects
- *R has to be seen in wider environmental context*
- ? Subliminal message of the consulting room, therapist’s stance
'The Nazis were a great falsehood, life’s greatest falsehood. Wherever they passed, up from the depths rose cowardice, treachery, murderousness, and violence against the weak. The Nazis drew everything to the surface, just as a black spell calls up the spirits of evil...Fawning speeches of disavowal were taking shape in the hearts of the poor in spirit. Thoughts of revenge...were being conceived. Hearts were being infected by callousness, pride and indifference. Murk rose up from the beds of lakes and rivers; toads swam up to the surface; thistles sprang up where wheat had been planted.’ (The Road 2010)
4: Role of positive life events/new beginning: adoption studies

• “Tendency to bounce back from a setback with a developmental advance as a result of a positive interaction between the self and the environment when an inhibiting condition has been removed”
Reprise: three key ingredients of Resilience

• *Agency*

• *Reflection*

• *Relationships*
Interactive effects
(Quinton & Rutter)

- Care home-reared girls: better planners made better marriages
- But no difference for those not from care homes – i.e. delayed and latent effects (c.f. dyslexia and literacy)
- Joining armed services for deprived boys: skill acquisition, delayed marriage
RECOVERY/IMPROVEMENT BY BEFRIENDING AND EXPERIENCE OF FRESH START/DIFFICULTY REDUCTION (FS/DR)

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<th>% Recovering</th>
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<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Befriended w/o FS/DR</td>
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<tr>
<td>Controls with FS/DR</td>
<td>81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Controls w/o FS/DR</td>
<td>20</td>
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5: Developmental models

• Waddington’s ‘canalisation’:

• Organism’s...‘capacity to organize itself and to keep on a normal phenotypic path amidst a field of conflicting forces (genotypic and environmental influences) that influence development and may sometimes cause disruption.’

• i.e. a dynamic process model – c.f. regression to ‘fixation points’
Waddingtonian epigenetics
Stem-cell differentiation: ? therapeutic analogue

Developmental potential

**Totipotent**
Zygote

**Pluripotent**
ICM/ES cells, EG cells, EC cells, mGS cells, iPSC cells

**Multipotent**
Adult stem cells (partially reprogrammed cells?)

**Unipotent**
Differentiated cell types

Epigenetic status

Global DNA demethylation

Only active X chromosomes;
Global repression of differentiation genes by Polycomb proteins;
Promoter hypomethylation

X inactivation;
Repression of lineage-specific genes by Polycomb proteins;
Promoter hypermethylation

X inactivation;
Derepression of Polycomb silenced lineage genes;
Promoter hypermethylation
Cascade model

• ‘Individual differences in development...a series of developmental pathways across an epigenetic, probabilistic landscape’ (Belsky & Fearon 02)

• Nothing succeeds like success; nothing fails like failure

• Interactive self-perpetuating, self-righting (or ‘self-wronging’) pathways

• Changing tracks: extreme vulnerability and danger where fears of re-traumatisation and shame reawakened
Challenge for psychotherapy

• To provide sufficient support and security for previous survival strategies to be relinquished
• Tolerating period of regression and disorganisation
• Emergence of new levels of functioning and more mature defences
Resilience and OCD

• 70 year old wo: father dies 12 weeks; mother: strict controlling brother-favouring
• Mid 20s: severe OCD: long admission MH: partial recovery with charismatic psychologist
• Empathy for care-home boys
• 60s: cancer: return of OCD; recluse; day/night reversal
• Avid reader; paper letter writer; socialist
Continued

• ‘How can I have lived for 70- years without realising that I needed a father?’

• The missing Hokusai: the wave that never breaks; perfection versus development

• Blame; non-mentalising

• Therapist inhibition/silence: any interpretation shame-inducing: ‘are you awake?’
Continued

• Missing sessions; the e-mail; fury at challenge
• ‘You call yourself a psychotherapist; you just want to get rid of me…’
• How resilient am I? Will I remain impermeably rigid, fracture under her assault. Can I stand my ground while acknowledging mistakes?
• ‘That e-mail was inappropriate and badly worded – but I reserve the right to go on challenging you when I feel it is right to do so…’
Continued

- The yawn: “you yawned; are you bored with me?”
- Acknowledgement; apology.
- Later: “I’ve been think about that yawn: the ‘brick wall’; thus far, and no further”
- ‘You’ll have to find a hammer and break it down”
- “But you’ll have to give me a clue about where to aim”.
Learning points

• Role of shame; ‘interpretation’ can feel like an attack, further criticism
• Meets with steely resilient resistance
• Every relationship a test
• Perfectionism: fear of shattering into a thousand pieces
Conclusions: general

• Resilience as much a reality as trauma: both universal phenomenon and individual differences
• Strengthening and restricting manifestations
• Multidisciplinary perspective needed: genetic, developmental, relational and ecological
Conclusions: psychodynamic

• The built-in rhythms and failures of therapy can, like those of parenthood, be resilience-promoting

• Canalisation means that changing developmental pathways entails moments of extreme vulnerability
Psychotherapy conclusions

• Therapy easily re-enacts trauma so that resilience labelled resistance
• Resilience strategies help avoid shame, and are self-preservative
• Therapists need to be open about mistakes, model living with failings
• Outcome goals = resilience features:
  *Self-awareness, agency, relationship*
Recovery across the generations
• Thanks for listening

• If you want slides:

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