

## **The resilience motif: implications for youth justice**

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## **The resilience motif: Implications for youth justice**

### **Introduction**

Notions of resilience are now firmly established in practice and research in social work and mental health. Concerns typically focus on how (and how well) children and young people cope with difficult life experiences and transitions (see for example, Drapeau et al (2007) on foster care and Stein (2007) on leaving the care system). Of course, there is wide variation in what is taken to represent resilience and, in Hart and Blincoe's (2007) view, knowledge and understanding of how professionals might help build resilience are still under-developed. Nevertheless, resilience, generally understood as 'good outcomes in spite of serious threat to adaptation or development' (Masten, 2001: 228), has entered the lexicon of children's services, and is embedded in the practice discourses around areas such as neglect, out of home placement and emotional vulnerability.

Yet resilience remains marginal within the youth justice literature and also in practice arrangements, focused for the past two decades on risk. Research in

youth offending teams (YOTs) suggests this has produced a selective and more conditional attention to young people's welfare and developmental needs (Field, 2007). Moreover, Phoenix (2009) found the risks posed by and risks to a young person are frequently conflated during assessment into a generalized notion of 'at riskiness' which is then used to justify intervention. Practitioners may intend to be helpful rather than punitive but the net effect, for Phoenix, is a return to a repressive form of welfarism more concerned with managing and controlling young people than supporting their development. And, sadly, this bears down most heavily on those young people facing the most complex, challenging personal and social circumstances, who have the fewest opportunities and resources to help build resilience.

This article adds to the voices critical of the narrow view of risks and needs inherent in the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) and its origins in developmental psychology (see for example, Armstrong, 2004; Case, 2007; Paylor, 2011; Smith, 2013). It argues for a wider perspective appreciative of young people's strengths and coping strategies as well as their attempts to gain a sense of power and personal agency in even the most challenging of circumstances. Of

course, young people may act in ways that are self-destructive or harmful to others, but a youth justice system that problematises young people and their behaviours is surely limited in enabling them to identify, choose and achieve more pro-social ways of acting and being. Turning the gaze towards the strengths and capacities of individuals and social contexts reflects the Youth Justice Board's present moves towards more holistic assessment. However, there is far greater promise in going beyond these welcome, but relatively modest, shifts in policy towards practice that actively fosters resilience and works with an awareness of the multiple layers within society that impact on young people and their development. The argument is for a positive and optimistic approach to practice that responds to young people newly in contact with youth justice agencies, as well as the constituency of deeply troubled and troubling young people whose needs are so badly met by the recent systems of justice and social care.

### **Some notes on resilience**

Resilience and what constitutes resilience has been much debated since the concept started to receive attention in the 1970s within psychology and the developmental sciences (Masten, 2001; Ungar et al, 2013). Although a variety of

definitions and ways of operationalising and measuring resilience have been employed (Luthar et al, 2000), the body of research and literature has indicated some areas of consensus. The first of these was the growing awareness that resilience is not a quality or a trait of the individual (Rutter, 1987), although certain dimensions of personality might be consistently associated with resilience (Masten, 2014a). Agreement has also developed around the importance of the environment in fostering or hindering the ability of individuals to survive or to thrive (Ungar, 2004a; Rutter, 2012a ) and, subsequently, the understanding of resilience as a dynamic process involving interaction between the individual and the environment that enables positive adaptation following adversity (Luthar et al, 2000). However, resilience is a complex concept, not least because it is dependent on judgments about degrees of risk and adversity and also about the criteria for assessing positive adaptation and what would count as being good or adequate adaptation (Masten, 2001). It thus opens to examination values and beliefs about what represents normative child development, making this a challenging area of enquiry, especially in diverse cultures and locations (Ungar, 2008; Masten, 2014a). Within youth justice, it also makes us question the assumptions made by services and in the risk factor research about the adaptation/ maladaptation of young offenders

facing difficult family, social or other experiences, and the tendency to frame their circumstances and behaviours in negative terms.

Over time, concepts of resilience have been applied across disciplines and Masten (2014a: 6) has recently suggested that it can be 'broadly defined as the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability or development'. In relation to children, she specifically distinguishes between the body of knowledge about positive child development (with or without experience of adversity) and resilience science that is more connected to surviving traumatic events or chronically poor conditions (2014b). As thinking has turned towards analysis of systems rather than individual functioning, key voices, amongst them Michael Ungar (2004a; 2004b) have argued for a fuller appreciation of the influences operating on the child or young person, not just the immediate ecology of the family and school.

Adopting a post-modern interpretation, Ungar (2004a; 2004b) explores resilience as a construct that encompasses a variety of understandings of what constitutes healthy functioning and adaptation, and how it is nurtured and maintained. In his view, resilience is intimately connected to an individual's ability to achieve and

maintain a view of him or herself as healthy, using the resources and opportunities that are available and accessible. Several definitions of resilience are discussed within this article, but the following, drawn from a large international study, has been widely quoted and is the most useful in terms of its scope:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar, 2008: 225)

What is relevant for youth justice is that, in this view, health-sustaining resources may not be conventionally pro-social. In fact, if what is available in the young person's environment is limited then navigating towards the best that is available may be the healthiest option. So, a young person excluded from school and a range of peer groups there may look for relationships, intimacy, a space in which to rehearse new social roles within a street gang, despite the trouble that might follow, because the alternative would be isolation and less opportunity for growth.

Ability to access what is available is also important – within school, learning difficulties, lack of reading skills, poor relationships with teaching staff may all impact on a young person's ability to negotiate what is required to receive the benefits of education. Thus, opting out of school might be a strategy for maintaining a positive self-identity, as illustrated by the young women in Bottrell's (2009a) study in Glebe, Sydney, whose truanting and hanging around with peers became 'both critique of alienating school practices and opting for the sense of acceptance, belonging and social support of the youth network that is seen as unavailable at school' (2009a: 328).

Developing the thinking about social contexts, academics from both psychology (Ungar, 2011, Ungar, 2012a) and sociology (Bottrell, 2009a; 2009b; France et al, 2012) have looked to the notion of social ecology in order to move beyond the tendency in the resilience research to consider only interactions within immediate family, school and community environments. These draw on the ideas of Bronfenbrenner (1979) to analyse questions of power and (dis)empowerment across a series of inter-connected social levels: the micro-level or interpersonal; the meso-level involving larger social groups and institutions, such as family or

school, which may interact with each other; exo-systems which may affect daily life but do not involve the individual as active participant (relevant examples might include the structure, organisation and funding of the education system and vocational training); and, finally, the macro-level which encompasses the ideological, social and political ideas expressed in practical terms in exo-systems.

From this perspective, crime and the context in which crime happens, are not produced by factors operating at the individual level alone, but by relationships between the actions of individuals and wider social processes (Armstrong, 2004). As noted by Bottrell et al (2010: 59), 'chains of events or influences at a macro-level may thus be traced into (and from) micro-ecologies as influences, structures and direct transactions with young people.' The youth justice system may thus be characterised as an exo-system whose arrangements reflect the prevailing social and cultural constructions of young people, crime and risk. Accordingly, at meso- and micro- levels, the actions and interactions of practitioners in youth offending and other children's services may intensify the punitive and criminalising effects arising from the macro and exo levels of the justice system, encouraged by target-driven cultures and standardised assessments. Conversely, supervisory and

helping relationships could be used consciously to mitigate such effects. Good co-ordination between families, schools and agencies at a meso-level can assist positive growth (Ungar, 2012b) and by extension the forms of resilience that enable young people to resist offending or to reduce harm, even in an unsympathetic macro-climate. Not that the impetus for change should rest solely with practitioners: the engagement and support of those involved in managing, training and making policy, for example, are vital if resilience is to be embedded system-wide.

### **Young people seeking health and empowerment**

Drawing on the work of the Canadian psychologist Michael Ungar (2004a; 2004b; 2008; 2011; 2012a), the discussion here centres on young people's desire to seek health and the power to create their own identity and self-definition, and what this might mean for their resilience. This has value for youth justice practice in two ways. First, it allows us to look anew at aspects of behaviour conventionally viewed as challenging, dubiously moral or even criminal. We can then begin to appreciate how these behaviours might bring the young person benefits (actual or perceived) or at least the avoidance of losses, such as diminished reputation or

status with peer groups. Where the social context provides limited choices, acting out or deviant behaviours may be one of the few viable avenues allowing him or her to feel a sense of power and agency. That does not necessarily mean that these behaviours are adaptive (Ungar, 2004b), nor that they are desirable. Yet in some instances they may be healthy responses to the particular circumstances the young person faces. Following this logic, resistance, defiance and persistent absconding from care, for example, may indicate coping strategies of some sort, rather than failure to cope. However, atypical coping may not be recognised as such and Ungar's (2004a) concern is to uncover instances of such 'hidden resilience'.

Second, the perspectives presented here highlight the salience of identity for young people and the way that they strive for validation and sense of self. Young people's attempts to build positive identities may stand at odds with the strong labels applied by the systems and institutions that they engage with. Being categorised as an offender has an obvious impact on social and personal identity, but designations as educationally failing, as problematic within the care system or as emotionally or behaviourally difficult, might just as easily become the primary

narrative about a young person. This is illustrated by qualitative research within the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC) which shows how the labelling experienced by young people is built up of multiple layers based on their poor behaviours but also aspects of class, gender, family and community outwith their control (McAra and McVie (2012). Relatedly, Ungar (2004a) describes the young people in his research as having 'problem-saturated identities' and being surrounded by pathogenic discourses. And only too often, the negative stories told about a young person become reinforced through communications between professionals and caregivers (Ungar, 2001), and treated as objective facts within agency records.

Perhaps not surprisingly, young people often resist the labels ascribed to them in an effort to develop their own self-definitions. Interestingly, Ungar and Teram's (2000) study of young people in therapy demonstrates how young people value being in control of their identity and how important this is for good mental health: Of course, again the resources and opportunities available to a young person affect the range of identities that he or she can choose to shape, particularly so where a young person lives in an institution or an area depleted in social capital.

Yet, as Ungar (2004a:184) notes, 'better to be a good delinquent or mental patient than just another problem child, invisible and vulnerable to the labels others force upon you'. To illustrate, Ungar (2001) discusses Allison and comments on her strengths:

Some of these strengths, which Allison prided herself on, were the same characteristics that treatment providers sought to extinguish: mouthiness, defiance, a "bad" attitude, sexual promiscuity, emotional dependency, addictions.....While problematic, these behaviours were reflective of Allison's determination to remain in control of her life (2001: 146-7).

Drawing on these perspectives, youth justice can learn a great deal from seeking strengths rather than problems and deficits, and favouring salutogenic (health-focused) discourses over pathologising ones (Ungar, 2004a). This does not mean ignoring risk because resilience and risk are intimately connected (Ungar, 2004b). But it does place a much more positive spin on risk related behaviours and risk-taking, and encourages practitioners to contextualise such behaviours, rendering them intelligible, where possible, in young people's terms. The practitioner, positioned alongside young people, can then focus on their concerns and the

obstacles that they perceive to enable progress to goals that they themselves define.

### **Resilience and risk**

Resilience and risk go hand in hand, at least to the extent that resilience presupposes risk: after all, if resilience is about surviving or achieving better than expected outcomes following adversity, then this necessarily involves the existence of a risk or threat to development (Masten, 2001). However, resilience is not measurable because it is not one definite thing and may manifest in a variety of ways in individuals who have experienced significant major stress or adversity (Rutter, 2012b). It is a matter of judgment in each individual case (Masten, 2001) rather than fact. This is where the study of resilience parts company with the research on risk and protective factors that so dominates youth justice. The latter is based on statistics and the probability of behaviours or outcomes within groups based on the assumption that there is similarity or patterns in the way individuals react. Resilience research, on the other hand, is most interested in difference and diversity in the ways that individuals respond to adversity (Rutter, 2012a; Rutter, 2012b). Studies also point specifically to the salience of cultural context in

determining indicators of resilience or vulnerability. For example, Ungar et al (2013) compare negative views of child labour in high income economies where value is placed on education to the situation in poorer countries where such work may be seen as a valuable contribution to family and community, providing psychological benefits for the young person. So what may be limiting or damaging in one context may act as a protective process in a different setting

Mechanisms that protect against risk have been helpfully categorised as compensatory, challenge or protective factors (Ungar, 2004a). First, particular personality traits or social factors, such as faith or involvement with a faith community, may compensate for or neutralise risk factors. Second, exposure to risks may present a young person with challenges and opportunities for learning where these risks are manageable and coping is recognised and validated. This is often framed as 'inoculation' (Ungar, 2004a) or as 'steeling effects' (Rutter, 2012b) which make the young person less vulnerable to those same risks in future. So, following this logic, we should pay close attention to what risk-taking means in young people's lives and where it may be helpful, rather than harmful, developmentally (Sharland, 2006). Finally, protective or promotive factors are not

static, but may be regarded as processes or mechanisms that target specific risks and provide opportunities for growth. Examples might be support within school in response to bullying or a stable relationship with one parent in the context of marital breakdown. Rutter (1987: 317) insightfully argues that vulnerability and protection are two ends – the negative and positive poles, if you like – of the same concept and that

The vulnerability or protective effect is evident only in combination with the risk variable....the terms “process” and “mechanism” are preferable to “variable” or “factor” because any one variable may act as a risk factor in one situation but as a vulnerability factor in another.

Rutter (1987) also draws on research to propose a series of mechanisms that might mediate the interaction of the risk and protective variables in a positive direction:

1. Reducing the risk impact, possibly by altering the risk or by reducing exposure to the risk
2. Reduction of negative chain reactions

3. Promoting self-esteem and self-efficacy
4. Providing opportunities

These are all pertinent to youth justice practice. In particular, attention to participative ways of working with young people may counteract the more usual experiences of disempowerment within the YJS (Hazel et al, 2002) and related systems of education and care, with positive effect on self-esteem and self-efficacy. As Rutter (1987: 327) notes 'the available evidence suggests that it is protective to have a well-established feeling of one's own worth as a person together with a confidence and conviction that one can cope successfully with life's challenges.' Bearing this in mind, young people are likely to experience supportive relationships characterised by active advocacy and collaborative problem-solving as opportunities for growth. This works in two ways, as the relationship itself shows the individual young person that he or she is valued, as well as opening space for modelling constructive ways of tackling problems and allowing the young person to practice new approaches and gain mastery of new skills.

This discussion has deliberately focused on risks that a young person may experience, whether immediate or indirect. These are not irrelevant to risk of re-offending or of harmful behaviours because there is often a clear association with experiences of adversity. However, foregrounding the developmental risks challenges the more common discourses of risk within youth justice practice. Sharland's (2006) insightful analysis of young people, risk and risk-taking, identifies that these topics have received relatively little attention within academic social work. Furthermore, what literature does exist falls either side of the care-control divide, with 'welfare' concerns for discrete populations of young people who are homeless, leaving care and so on being addressed on the one hand, and a more prominent literature focused on young people deemed to be 'troublesome' rather than 'troubled' on the other. The guidance available for youth justice practitioners overwhelmingly tends to take a particular view of risk allied to the RFPP and concerned with welfare and developmental risks only insofar as they are seen as predicting future offending (or offensive) behaviours (see, for example, Blyth et al, 2007; Stephenson et al. 2011). Balancing considerations of harms, risks and needs is a tricky business for youth justice practitioners who may feel accused of colluding with a young person and excusing their behaviours by introducing social

needs and contexts into their assessments (Whyte, 2009). Nevertheless, it is necessary to do so for ethical reasons and because, after all, youth justice services are charged with a duty of care towards young people and with responsibilities to protect them from harm (Baker et al. 2011). Good practice, moreover, is not just about eliminating risks – linked to welfare or offending – but helping young people achieve successful transitions into adulthood and lives which are fulfilling, not just offence-free.

### **Healthy development, ‘good lives’ and harm**

It is interesting to consider these dilemmas in relation to debates within the adult penal system which is slowly – perhaps rather imperfectly – orientating itself towards desistance and strength-based models of practice (McNeill, 2006; 2009; McNeill and Weaver, 2010). The primary framework for this, the Good Lives Model (GLM), originally started its life as an intervention for sex offenders (Ward and Stewart, 2003; Ward and Marshall, 2004), but has now been **adopted in practice endorsed as a framework for practice** across the wider offender population. Arising from positive psychology (Ward and Maruna, 2007), the GLM is based on the assumption that all human beings are naturally predisposed to pursue certain

goals, framed as 'primary human goods'. These include creativity, personal agency, relationships (friendship and intimacy) and excellence in play and work (adapted from Ward and Maruna, 2007: 113), which each have an intrinsic value and contribute to well-being (Connolly and Ward, 2008). The GLM works from the premise that

All individuals are programmed – hard-wired, if you like – to seek these primary goods. Where legitimate and pro-social means of doing so are frustrated – perhaps due to factors in the individual's social make-up or external environmental conditions that limit opportunities – the individual may try to achieve the goods in other ways. This may involve offending or other behaviours that directly or indirectly damage others. (Robinson, 2011: 296)

So this approach argues that the problem lies in the strategies that the individual uses, not in the goals themselves. And work within this model is orientated towards enabling individuals to progress towards primary goods in less destructive ways and to access secondary goods, such as employment, as a means of achieving primary goods. The aim of rehabilitation is to engage individuals in identifying and working towards the goals that they define, recognising that 'it is

always much easier to motivate individuals if they are reassured that the goods that they are aiming for are acceptable: the problem resides in the way they are sought' (Ward and Maruna, 2007: 296).

This resonates in important ways with Ungar's (2004a) propositions about the in-built desire to seek resources for health and powerful identities. Both, of course, may be criticised for being overly optimistic about human nature and for over-claiming the natural orientation towards 'primary human goods' in the one case, and health-seeking in the other. These criticisms may have some purchase from a purely academic standpoint in terms of explaining human nature and behaviours. However, putting these reservations aside, both have positive applications to practice, directing practitioners and helpers to appreciate the client's perspective and to work together towards agreed goals. They each provide a clear, although different, rationale for a more person-centred approach that is robust in terms of values and respectful of rights (Ward and Maruna, 2007; Connolly and Ward, 2008; Ungar, 2004a). And they both pay attention to the stories or narratives that individuals tell about themselves and how they order and re-order their identities.

A superficial understanding of GLM might suggest that the offender's wishes and desires are promoted above the interests of public protection. However, for Connolly and Ward (2008), practice needs to find a delicate balance between 'approach goals' that promote primary goods and 'avoidance goals' aimed at reducing risk, in other words work on factors that bring benefits as well as work focused on reducing harms or negative outcomes. They argue that

Simply seeking to increase the well-being of an offender without regard for their level of risk may result in a happy but dangerous individual.

Alternatively, attempting to manage an offender's risk without concern for goods promotion or well-being could lead to rather punitive practice and a disengaged and hostile client. (2008: 158)

In a different, but related way, Ungar (2004a) makes an important distinction between understanding a young person's perspectives and uncritically taking his or her side. Professional boundaries suggest limits to what can be defined as health-enhancing, where behaviours are self-destructive or harmful to others. The professional task then becomes helping a young person to find other ways of experiencing power and constructing identity. He argues for the use of narrative

therapy to explore the young person's behaviour and what he or she is hoping to gain from it, together deconstructing existing identity stories and identifying resources to build an alternative self-identity and social interactions that pose less threat (2004a). This begins with a reframing of negative descriptions of self so, for example, 'delinquent', 'insane', 'depressed' become 'struggling', 'resisting', 'surviving' or 'coping'; this opens space for reflecting upon the strengths and skills that the young person has already developed and can deploy to assist change. This then moves on to 'narrative recovery' which involves the creation of 'counter-stories' that gain positive recognition and respect from others (Baldwin, 2013). The research on adults desisting from crime helpfully illuminates the process of identity transformation and the need for positive affirmations of a 'new self' (Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Immarigeon; Veysey et al, 2009). However, those works reflect upon change over time, while the central issue for practitioners – even more critical within the justice system – is how to respond in the moment to harmful behaviours and to seek co-operation from the young person in managing them.

Here, again, Ungar (2004a) is insightful about feelings of power and control. Intriguingly, he suggests that young people do not necessarily reject control or the

authority of adults, but they are much more likely to do so in situations where they feel labelled and subjugated. In his research, he found that young people appreciated some limits on their behaviours, particularly when they felt they had voluntarily agreed to those controls (at least in part), rather than having controls imposed upon them. In his view, much of this centred on the young people feeling that they shared power and influence over how they were defined (2004a) – effectively, that they were still able to maintain a sense of personhood separate from the labels they were given by virtue of diagnosis, pattern of offending or care status, which carried over into modes of formal and informal regulation. This helps us appreciate why some young people resist or rebel against rules or constraints in certain contexts yet willingly comply in others. Conformity that is enforced is not palatable but the experience may be entirely different when compliance is a product of interaction and negotiation that recognises the young person as an individual. It is also interesting that young people may actually seek containment and behave in ways that precipitate hospitalisation or a residential placement. This may seem counter-intuitive, given the negative associations with experiences of care and custody, but may well be a viable strategy and an expression of agency when a young person is feeling unsafe or ‘stuck’. And in some cases entering a

placement may sufficiently disrupt previous identities to enable the young person to construct new roles and sense of being (Ungar, 2004a).

Of course, issues of power within a therapeutic relationship, even if the therapy is delivered in a correctional setting, are not the same issues apparent in a case management relationship within youth justice. Young people may not enter therapy or counselling entirely by choice but only a small proportion are made subject to compulsory treatment. In comparison, young people engage with the youth justice system under direct legal mandate and that creates a different set of responsibilities and accountabilities for the practitioner. Importantly, though, that does not foreclose opportunities to attend to the young person's perspective and to negotiate to allow him or her to exercise choice and agency within the process of supervision. Extensive narrative work may not be realistic given the time and resources available, and the risk of harm may demand more direct, practical intervention. Nevertheless, awareness of the importance of narratives and ways of framing experiences is still pertinent for practitioners. Listening to young people may open up more helpful interpretations of ostensibly dysfunctional behaviours (Ungar, 2004a) and suggest new areas to work on together. Listening is a critical

element in creating a safe relational space for young people to address complex issues. Such collaborative relationships may also enhance the legitimacy of practitioner power and its potential as a source of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for young people in their efforts to build new identities (Munford and Sanders, 2014).

Looking to the GLM may again be instructive in responding to risk of serious harm. Here the practitioner works with the individual to agree goals which include items prioritized by the individual balanced by items from the agency's agenda to address the public protection concerns. This is more than a crude trade-off, as it models an open and transparent approach that seeks to engage the individual in the management of risk. Conventional tools, such as electronic monitoring, may still be used but the focus is on identifying the 'primary goods' the individual is seeking through offending and enabling him or her to access these same goods without harming others (Ward and Maruna, 2007). Negotiating in this way may be trickier with young people, depending on age and maturity, but the principle still stands. If the young person feels that the practitioner is interested in what is important for him or her and is prepared to invest in the relationship, he or she is much more likely to see work within supervision to reduce risks as relevant and as

an opportunity for growth, rather than an imposition to be resisted at all costs. Furthermore, recognising that risks are produced or amplified by wider social conditions as well as individual actions, enables a more balanced view that avoids undue blame being placed on the individual whilst at the same time orientating the practitioner towards accessing positive social and community resources. Moving out of the office and engaging with the social, educational and community spaces that young people inhabit is essential, in order both to understand the benefits and the boundaries of these environments (physical, social and psychological) and to co-create new networks and contacts with a view to the future.

### **Young people in groups and gangs**

It is worth reflecting on young people's social networks which typically expand during adolescence as they engage with the secondary school environment and encounter more outlets for recreation outside of the family. Studies have shown how the diversity and strength of social relations affect the availability of opportunities as well as the support that each young person receives to exploit these opportunities in the transition to adulthood (Raffo and Reeves, 2000; Boeck,

2009). Families remain important as a resource but, as young people move through their teenage years, most start to seek and to exploit the resources of their friendship networks and peer groups. By investing in relationships and collective activities, they create spaces in which they are able to practise skills with other young people and to experiment with leadership and other roles not available within their family structure (Coleman, 2011). Close friendships also allow young people to develop intimacy and trusting relations that contribute to well-being and sense of self. Significantly, and against conventional expectations, young people may still find these benefits in peer groups that are problematic or anti-social in other respects (Ungar, 2004a).

Groups of young people are readily treated with suspicion and peer group influences are clearly framed as a negative risk within the RFPP (France et al, 2012). The reality of engagement with peers is much more complex than this suggests, being an active and interactive process (Ungar, 2004a). Certainly, young people may have greater long-term gains from a variety of friendships and peer networks that provide 'bridging capital' – contacts, experiences and forms of knowledge that broaden opportunities and horizons (Boeck, 2009). However, the

networks that young people are able to build are dependent on where they are physically and socially located. Lack of financial resources and mobility means, for some young people, reliance on the resources and the cultural repertoires of their immediate environment (Henderson et al, 2007). And young people with less secure homes and family relationships to provide a buffer against negative aspects in the environment may find themselves more susceptible. Even for these young people, risks and benefits are not clear cut; they may enjoy socialising with other young people and, although some activities may be 'risky' they may well be outweighed by other pro-social activities (Bottrell et al, 2010). Concentrating only on the negative consequences of young people 'hanging out' ignores the fact that 'peer groups provide more than opportunities to experience the illicit: they are also sites of informal learning..... that are important to young people's competence and coping with the everyday problems that they face' (France et al., 2012: 85).

Groups for young people also represent a source of collective power, particularly important at a stage of life where power and social capital through responsibilities in the fields of family, work and citizenship are limited (Barry, 2006; Henderson et al, 2007). In some respects, this may reflect young people's lack of political voice

and influence at the macro- and exo- levels of society, motivating young people to come together to maximise their personal and social empowerment (Ungar, 2004a). In more practical ways, young people may value acceptance and 'street cred' within a group which makes them feel safer and provides 'back-up' when needed on the streets (France et al., 2012). Research further indicates how violence may be an important tactic at a micro-level to gain or maintain standing in a social 'pecking order' (Phillips, 2003) and to avoid the emotional consequences of further victimisation. In this sense, it can legitimately be interpreted as a sign of resilience, rather than pathology, and may also bond the individual young person more strongly to the group where used to demonstrate loyalty or care for another member (Hine and Welford, 2012).

Low level violence between peers is often a taken for granted aspect of street cultures, albeit for young women tending to take verbal rather than physical forms (Batchelor et al, 2001; Phillips, 2003), While it may be seen as problematic by adults, it is not clear that it represents such a problem for many of the young people involved. But the benefits may be specific to certain contexts, such as school or the local street scene.—Moreover, young people's social worlds are not

static and what may be culturally acceptable at one age as a means of 'getting on' becomes less appropriate and useful as different social milieu and opportunities open up (Phillips, 2003). It may thus be counter-productive for schools and other professionals to routinely respond in formal ways to low-level violence and other behaviours which are jettisoned as a matter of course by most young people as they lose their utility.

Different issues, of course, arise in relation to more serious violence. Drawing on the ESYTC research, McAra and McVie (2012) analyse the 'rules of engagement' on the streets and the strict codes of behaviour 'policed' and reproduced by young people themselves, who drew a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable levels of aggression and offending. And these were closely related to gendered roles and identities:

Young people had to gauge their behaviour carefully. For example, aggressive behaviour amongst girls might increase their popularity with girls, but it might make a girl unpopular (and, therefore, undesirable, in the eyes of boys).....Boys also needed to ensure that they took on the "right" people

(neither too tough nor too soft) so they were involved in just enough violence to keep their names in the headlines, but not so much it would lead to them being shunned by others. (2012: 366)

Interestingly, young people who fail to negotiate these complex but informal rules risk being subjected to exclusionary practices by their peers. Often these are 'particular types of young people who might be defined as both vulnerable and challenging' (2012: 361) and most in need of positive peer relationships. Social isolation or reliance on a small network may then limit the space for learning, growth and 'identity work' available through peers, which is compounded over time.

From a slightly different angle, MacDonald and Marsh's (2005) study of young people growing up in de-industrialised Teesside considered the impact of poverty, insecure labour markets and restricted mobility. Many of the participants in their research described spending time on the local streets because they lacked the resources to pay for cinemas and other leisure pursuits. While the majority graduated from the streets to socialising in pubs and clubs, the 'leisure career' of others remained firmly in their local area, and 'for them, friendship groups had

hardened up, becoming more tightly knit and almost wholly based upon the immediate neighbourhood of home' (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007: 345). Such networks are restricted in social capital and may even produce 'negative social capital' (Sletten, 2011) when the sense of camaraderie is based on joint involvement in illicit and dangerous activities that exacerbate separation from the wider group of peers. Whilst offending and drug use is not an inevitable consequence of prolonged street-based leisure, there does appear to be an association, particularly where there is little opportunity to extend networks and progress to work or other activities. And identities, which are socially produced and reproduced, may become extremely 'stuck' in negative mode.

This all underlines the need for practice to be sensitive to the significance of peer relationships (or the absence of relationships) for young people. They may offer a rich resource that helps sustain a healthy and positive sense of self in difficult environments. And some young people will be able to transfer their relational skills to other contexts, perhaps just needing recognition of their social competence, alongside support and practical assistance. For other young people, routes into pro-social networks need to be created in more deliberate and purposeful ways,

and here key adults may provide the link –or bridge, if you like – into new social environments and ways of being.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Resilience as a motif or a consistent theme for youth justice practice has considerable value, emphasising health, well-being and empowerment. Practice approaches focused narrowly on offending miss vital opportunities to engage young people and to build supportive relationships that enable young people to resolve the issues and difficulties that they feel stand in their way. The resilience perspective presented here is inherently more appreciative of young people's views and the meaning they give to their actions and their relationships. Ungar's (2004a) arguments in favour of 'hidden resilience' invite all those involved in youth justice to look again at what may be conventionally seen as challenging or dysfunctional behaviours, identifying where young people are demonstrating social strengths and skills in their actions and interactions.. Reframing behaviours in this way does not mean colluding when behaviours are harmful or even self-defeating, but it does enable services to recognise young people as having competences and capacities, even though they may be misapplied. This then shifts the focus from

problems and deficits for the practitioner to address, and creates space for co-constructing visions and practical steps to move forwards.

Risks are conceptualised within this resilience approach as fluid rather than fixed entities, capable of interacting with personal and social characteristics or conditions, to exacerbate vulnerabilities or, conversely, to build strengths. In this sense, developing resilience is a process aided by the interaction between risk factors and mechanisms that protect. For practice, this implies a finely tuned view of the nature and extent of risks that young people face and what might counteract these risks. This may be highly individualised, depending on the young person's social context and the resources that he or she is able to access. Where resources are lacking, there may be an active role for the practitioner in helping young people to navigate towards fresh sources of guidance, support and capital, and to negotiate their use (Ungar, 2004a).

Strengths-based approaches orientated towards resilience also acknowledge the salience of identity for young people, produced within their social networks and

through interactions. Crucially, these include interactions with institutions such as school and, for some, the systems involved with health, social care and youth justice. The restrictive nature of the labels applied by these systems as they categorise young people and their 'problems', cannot be over-emphasised. In practical ways they may close down opportunities, but they impact psychologically as well where young people internalise negative views of themselves and their potentials. For some young people this means accepting a delinquent identity as inevitable, for others it could involve creating and exploiting particular deviant identities in the absence of other viable options (Ungar, 2001; 2004a).

Identity, power and agency are keystone elements within a resilience approach. Young people may seek each of these in ways that are destructive or self-defeating but that does not negate the validity of their attempts to find self-expression and meaning. Sensitivity to developing identities and ways of being in the social world is an essential ingredient in positive engagement with young people and the collaborative enterprise of seeking resources and opportunities to explore other possible selves. What is set out here is an argument for a future-facing youth justice system that works with young people as they develop and

embark on the transition to adulthood. The driving force is the will to enable young people to utilise their energies in positive and purposeful ways to create new social roles and identities. In this sense practice is orientated towards optimism and a belief in young people and their capacities, expecting growth and progress, not the persistence of problems.

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