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Resilience Theory, Information Behaviour and Social Support in Everyday Life

Abstract: LIS professionals may benefit from understanding resiliency theory in order to better serve users who have experienced stressful or adverse life events. This paper examines key theoretical concepts of stress, resilience, affect and cognition overlap and social support as key elements of coping or buffering the individual from negative outcomes.

Résumé : Les professionnels de la bibliothéconomie et des sciences de l'information tireraient profit d'une meilleure compréhension de la théorie de la résilience lors de la prestation de services aux usagers en situation de stress. Cette communication examine les concepts théoriques clé que sont le stress, la résilience, le chevauchement de l'affectif et du cognitif ainsi que le soutien social comme éléments de réponse et de défense aux situations négatives.

1. Introduction

Losing a job or losing a home in today's poor economy results in a loss of a 'sense of place.' The resultant feelings of stress affects everyday life information seeking and the need to reconstruct what 'place' might mean.

As a researcher who has worked with both the homeless and abused and neglected children I have often heard those who work with these groups such as social workers or social service agency resource providers describe them collectively as 'resilient.' Resiliency is an intriguing concept and there is an abundance of research in the field of psychology but very little in the field of library and information studies. Yet as information providers we interact and attempt to help users who are dealing with stress and adversity.

It is critically important to note up front that this paper will address stress as a motivator or catalyst for information seeking. *The researcher is not positing that library and information agency personnel act in any therapeutic or clinical role to diagnose and/or treat mental health issues.* The discussion is at the lesser levels of stress rather than that of *trauma*, which is best left to those trained in these areas.

Rather, in this paper the key concepts will be discussed in order to inform LIS professionals to better provide needed information in a manner that information seekers will process. Libraries and virtual spaces in emergent social media can act as community spaces for social support and individual providers may be perceived than as helpful and caring partners.

2. Stress

Stress is usually used in a negative connotation when in reality it is neither positive nor negative. *Eustress* is the term for positive stress. Positive stress can be a motivator, exciting and brings about a constructive outcome. For some people, procrastination is an example of eustress. *Distress* is the opposite and can lead to negative outcomes such as short or long term anxiety. And, since life is complicated and messy, the terms are not useful when used in an 'either-or' context. Stress is better is better represented as a continuum.

Eustress ←--------------------------------→ Distress

In addition, individuals experiencing the same life event will respond differently in terms of their perceptions of what occurred, previous experience and other coping skills.

For LIS professionals it is useful to be able to understand the causal nature of stress producing anxiety when working with information users.

3. Resilience

There are several variations of definitions of the term 'resilience' in the psychology literature. For the purposes of this theoretical concept paper, Garmezy's (1994) works best for an LIS context:

> Resilience means the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate   over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges. It is an ongoing and developing fund of energy and skill that can be used in current situations. (Garmezy, 1994 in VanBreda, 2001)

Kaplan, et al. (1996) refers to 'protective factors' (personal, familial and *institutional safety nets*) that aid in resiliency. Libraries and other information agencies *could*, and possibly a moral argument could be advanced that they *should,* be promoted as part of an individual's support system to aid in regaining equilibrium. A complimentary term to resilience is *recovery* but as this concept seems to fit better with diagnosis and treatment it will not be addressed in this short paper.

Resilience is a two-dimensional construct (Masten & Obradovic, 2006) where an individual not only adapts from his or her experiences but then develops coping behaviors to prevent or diminish future occurrences of that experience. LIS institutions and professionals certainly play roles in providing useful information to help add to these *buffering* factors. Buffering (Lin, Dean & Ensel, 1986) is an artifact of social support but could also be extended to the action of acquiring new knowledge through information seeking and use.

Often the concept of stretching a rubber band is used to illustrate the term. A rubber band can be stretched to varying lengths but it snaps back into place. Supposedly, someone

who is resilience develops life skills that allow him or her to experience stressors but then can recover pre-stressor levels. But we know that if a rubber band is stretched too far or too often it does not return to its original position. The area that has unraveled is, in a person's life, damage or impairment. Use of this analogy can be limiting as it restricts resiliency to simply a return to pre-stressor levels of functioning. But, experience and learning or becoming informed can actually lead to an enhanced outcome of *thriving* (VanBreda, 2001).

A useful action model of an individual's possible responsibilities to a stressful incidence can include thriving- at the highest level and *succumbing* at the lowest. Carver (1998) illustrates these possible outcomes in Figure 1.

[insert Figure 1. here]

LIS professionals who understand the concept of resiliency and the process model should be positioned to better provide information and resources to users experiencing stressful life events. Libraries and information agencies could become valuable support structures for their communities whether through in-house or virtual spaces.

4. Brief Lit Review

There is considerable research on resiliency behaviors in fields outside of LIS. For this brief review a select few that examined resilient groups are included here. Caplan (1989) studied children of poor, mostly refugee Vietnamese parents in the US and Germany. Findings showed that although children grew up in poor neighborhoods they were academically higher achievers than middle class American children. Elder and Conger (2000) studied children of American farmers in the 1980s and 1990s and found that due to stable homes they grew up to be law abiding and academically successful. Elder (1974) also studied the lives of men who were children during the US Great Depression years of 1929-1939. This study produced the fascinating finding that men from deprived households earned college degrees as often as non-deprived families. Breitenbach (1982) studied Spaniards who fled 1970s rule under Francisco Franco to Germany. While they did not thrive as a group themselves, their children performed on an educational par with German children. Occupationally, Spanish adults did as well as German adults. All of these studies examined the stresses, coping and adapting behaviors that led to resilient lives.

5. Factors that Affect Resilience

There are several factors noted in the literature (VanBreda, 2001 in particular) that play a role in developing resiliency. A few that relate to information behaviour are noted here. *Hardiness* pertains to mediating and reducing the negative effects of stress. *Locus of control,* or the perception that an individual has control of his or her own destiny, determines whether the individual feels a sense of being a victim of circumstances or not. *Learned resourcefulness* refers to a set of cognitive skills- such as information seeking

and use behaviours- but is not a personality trait. Related to learned resources is *experience.* Experience is often the basis for future coping efforts. *Self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1994) then comes into play "as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives."

6. Affect and Information Processing

Affect and information processing is discussed at length by Wyer, Clore and Isbell (1999). For the purposes of this paper, the concept that there is an overlap between the affective and cognitive information domains is important to acknowledge. *Affect* is defined as 'the positively or negatively valenced subjective reactions that a person experiences at a given point in time. The authors draw a distinction between affect, which is an internally and subjectively realized experience as opposed to the external knowledge systems that are cognition. But there is a space where these domains overlap. An individual's ability to process information as a cognitive process can be interfered with by affective reactions. An example is that of parents in neonatal intensive care units (NICU) where nurses noted having to provide the same information multiple times before the parent processed it fully (Helliwell, 2003).

7. Social Support and Information Resources in Actual and Virtual Environments

Social support is 'the perceived or actual instrumental and/or expressive provisions supplied by the community, social networks, and confiding partners' (Lin, Dean & Ensel, 1986). Libraries and social service agencies are potentially very valuable sources of information but this is limited if users do not get a sense of support either from the institutions or the service providers. For example, the homeless often feel uncomfortable in public libraries because they sense negative judgments being made about their hygiene or their tendency to live private lives in public spaces. Libraries are often their main access points to computers and the Internet. Homelessness is a stressful experience and while some libraries do promote a welcoming sense of place, many do not. If a homeless person's social support network is only available via the web, for example from a Facebook page, they are doubly denied access to valuable resources. Rather than view certain users as unworthy or undeserving of services whether from personal or institutional anxieties or due to a lack of understanding the critical concepts of stress and resiliency, libraries and information agencies could rather serve as 'helpers' who assist users develop buffering effects by providing useful information in a kind and caring manner.

8. Conclusion

It has been difficult to distill complex human thought processes and behaviours into such a short paper. There are a great many library users who have a very positive and strong

'sense of place' with libraries and information agencies but we must be cognizant that there are those who have negative experiences. By understanding more about stress and resilience and their effect on information behaviours we can begin to provide better services. Future efforts include the development of an LIS specific model that will provide more instructive directives on how to do this but before we can understand the *how* of a challenge it is important to begin to attempt to understand the *why*.

Figure 1. Responses to Adversity: The Domain of Possibility
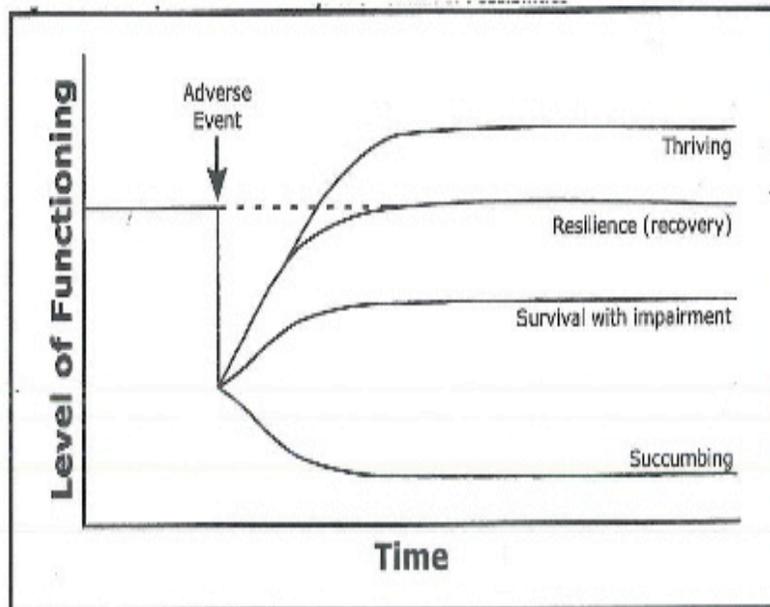
(Carver, 1998, p. 246)

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