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Time for 'resilience': community mediators working with marginalised young people offer a novel approach

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Abstract

Purpose

Since the 2008 financial crisis state retrenchment has added to the harshness of life for marginalised groups globally. This UK study suggests community activism may promote human capacity and resilience in innovative ways. This paper addresses the relationship between non-normative understandings of time and resilience.

Design/methodology/approach

This research paper is based on qualitative study of the work of a third sector organisation based in an urban area in the UK which provides training in mediation skills for community mediators. These community mediators (often former 'gang members') work with young people in order to prevent conflict within and between groups of white British, South Asian and Roma heritage

Findings

Community mediators are reflexively developing temporalities which replace hegemonic linear time with a situationally 'open time' praxis. The time 'anomalies' which characterise the community mediators' engagement appear related to aesthetic rationality, a form of rationality which opens up new ways of thinking about resilience. Whether community mediators' understandings and enactments of resilience can point to broader changes of approach in the delivery of social care is considered.

Practical implications

This paper contributes to critical understandings of resilience that challenge traditional service delivery by pointing to an alternative approach that focuses on processes and relationships over pre-defined outcomes.

Social implications

Hegemonic understandings of time (as a linear process) can delegitimise potentially valuable understandings of resilience developed by members of marginalised communities.

Originality

This paper is original in developing a critical analysis of the relationship between resilience and time.

Introduction

People 'on the margins' are not generally identified as normatively resilient despite the fact that they often respond to situations of adversity in creative and novel ways which ameliorate suffering and social exclusion (Fisher, 2007, 2008; Theron, 2012; France *et al.*, 2013). Unorthodox forms of resilience, sometimes referred to as 'actually existing resourcefulness' (Evans and Reid, 2014, p.84) remain largely unacknowledged beyond the communities and groups which co-create them. This paper offer an original perspective in that it considers the hitherto neglected intersections between time and resilience. It is suggested that hegemonic understandings regarding the right and proper use of time, both in relation to everyday activities and to understandings of the lifecourse, may neglect the resilience strategies of marginalised groups that act within alternative temporal understandings. The research presented here is based on a study that investigated the actually existing resourcefulness of community mediators (CMs). CMs, often former 'gang members' themselves, are of interest as they have re-configured their life biographies by engaging positively with young people who are involved in gang-related activities, or who are at risk of becoming involved in gang-related activities.

The study's focus on time and resilience did not constitute a research question identified by the project team at the outset but emerged instead in the process of collecting and analysing data. The study forms part of a research collaboration (tasked with applying the idea of resilience to public health) that was convened through the World Universities Network (WUN). The collaboration gave rise to two distinct but related research groups: one focusing specifically on new approaches to resilience in young people whilst the other group, (including the authors of this paper), investigated resilience amongst service providers who work with young people. This was considered an important area as service providers' own resilience, and their understandings of resilience, are likely to be reflected in the services they are able to provide to young people.

The aim of the collaborative study on resilience and service providers was to take an assets based approach to investigate how and why service users in health and social care develop resilience, and how this impacts on their work with young people. The longer term purpose was to develop appropriate interventions that might support empathic, committed and sustainable responses to situations of endemic stress.

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The objectives were:

a) To explore how service providers who promote the health of young people understand significant adversity, resilience and systems which promote resilience in general

b) To investigate the structural, social, cultural and psychological resources associated with resilience in service providers who promote the health of youth

c) To apply the emerging understanding of resilience to enhance the education and support of service providers

As resilience is a quality that is general viewed in terms of compliance with normative standards and values (Neocleous, 2013) we were interested in whether our research might identify forms of resilience that were directed towards resistance and/or social change.

Within the collaboration, service providers were defined broadly, including those licensed by a professional body, those engaged in employed service delivery but not licensed through a professional code, and people in marginalised employment and/or volunteers. As of four studies developed under the broader collaboration, this project specifically investigated community mediators working with young people involved in gang-related conflict in a challenging urban environment in the United Kingdom. The community mediators, who, having 'turned their backs' on their previous gang-related activities, are often community activists who are concerned about tensions in their community and who mediate on a voluntary basis. Other community mediators (CMs) implement the role as part of their employment responsibilities in third sector or religious organisations.

Background to the study

The CMs who participated in this study work in close collaboration with a third sector organisation in the north of England which provides training in mediation skills. There is a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the relationship between the third sector and the state (Amin, 2009). What is clear is that in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the relationship between the third sector and the state varies significantly across the globe (Halsall *et al.*, 2016; Pape *et al.*, 2016). The underlying assumption is often that it is the role of the third sector to re-integrate the marginalised and vulnerable back into the 'mainstream' (Pape *et al.*, 2016). Resilience, in other words, becomes a normalized standard for mapping out normal from abnormal behaviour. In relation specifically to young people who have become involved in inner city gangs, the goal is to prevent 'anti-social' and

criminal behaviour by aligning young people's sense of success and self-worth with goals which are in tune with the normal functioning of society (Amin, 2009; Southwick *et al.*, 2011). Many, however, regard the third sector as offering a distinctive value system which privileges human solidarity in order to develop new and alternative forms of social power (see Gibson-Graham, 2006; Amin, 2009; Fisher and Byrne, 2012; Downing, 2016). This paper contributes to this debate by addressing the understandings and enactments of resilience amongst CMs, arguing that their understandings of resilience and its relationship with time deserve greater acknowledgement.

The CMs who participated in this study engage in two localities in an urban area in the north of England. Both localities have high levels of multiple deprivation and a history of white working class communities adjusting to migration from South-Asia as well as more recent Roma arrivals. In one locality levels of animosity between these communities are increasing with white British and South-Asian heritage communities often finding common ground in hostility towards new Roma migrants. The other locality is characterised by a thriving illicit night-time economy associated with street violence. In this context, young people of South Asian heritage are perceived as vulnerable to agitation by political and religious extremists. These tensions are manifest in anti-social behaviour in both localities, where internal and external community cohesion is under growing pressure. The CMs work with young people under the age of 25 focusing on preventing conflict within and between groups of white British, South Asian and Roma children and young adults. This involves responding to conflict as it occurs in public spaces and to developing and supporting 'one off' or regular social meetings that seek to develop commonalities and dialogue amongst young people in situations of conflict. When young people are in situations of conflict this is often homogenised as 'gang-related'. In referring to 'gangs', we appreciate that this is a highly loaded term and that there are diverging ideas about what constitutes a gang (Franzese *et al.*, 2016).

Some CMs can be seen as community activists who are concerned about tensions in their community and who mediate on a voluntary basis. Others undertake the role as part of their employment responsibilities in third sector or religious organisations. The pathways to the role are integrated through a common platform of training in mediation and conflict resolution processes, provided by a third sector organisation which promotes new career opportunities through the development of mediation skills.

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Literature review: resilience

Resilience is generally regarded as a quality that enables people to experience wellbeing despite the disadvantages, adversity or pressures to which they are subjugated. Within a developmental psychology framework, resilience is defined as the 'ability to maintain personal and professional wellbeing in the face of on-going work stress and adversity' (McCann et al., 2013, p. 60-61). In some contexts, resilience is defined as the psychological capability of an individual either to build or to access support (Dziengel, 2012). Much of the criticism of the psychological approach to resilience is that it tends to define resilience as simply an attribute—either learned or innate—of an individual who can cope with stresses (Leipold and Greve, 2009). From a psychological perspective, resilience tends to be viewed as a latent 'interpersonal' coping capacity, even if this is viewed as dependent on wider resources or structures for support (Ungar, 2012, p. 13). The processes of social production that create conditions of risk and growth are often neglected (Ungar, 2012).

From a socio-ecological perspective (see, for example, Ungar, 2012), resilience is generated through collective forms of engagement. In other words, the focus is on how families, peer groups and communities secure for themselves the social, material and emotional/spiritual resources which contribute to human wellbeing. Resilience is thus conceptualised as emanating from bio-directional interaction between people and their social ecologies (Theron, 2012). This does not preclude a critical stance as to what constitutes resilience. From a constructivist perspective, Ungar (2004, 2012) and Bottrell (2009) suggest that for some young people, deviance can be regarded as a health adaptation to survive in unhealthy circumstances. Resilience from this perspective is regarded as embedded within specific social, ethnic and cultural contexts.

Researchers have also studied the links between professionalism and resilience in specific, usually professional, occupation groups often associated with caring for children such as health and social care workers and teachers (Collins, 2007; Gu and Day, 2013; McCann *et al.*, 2013). These studies often focus on managing stress and workplace practices and management responses to and support for overcoming issues. A 2013 literature review of health professions (McCann et al, 2013) found that inconsistencies between studies regarding definitions and measurements of resilience made comparisons across professions a challenge. A systematic meta-synthesis (Truter *et al.*, 2017), found a lack of research

internationally analysing how child protection social workers develop resilience to workplace pressures. Truter *et al.* (2017) concluded that more local studies were required in order to investigate culturally specific contexts, including context specific understandings of resilience before recommendations are made to develop meaningful interventions that will promote resilience in children and young people.

Little research has considered resilience in third sector or community organisations and their volunteers. Gooch and Warburton (2009) explored resilience, together with adaptability and transformability, in a community-based group of volunteers. However, they treated the group as a whole, as essentially a socioecological system, rather than focusing on the individual perspectives of the participants. Howlett and Collins (2014) studied an organisation supporting survivors of domestic abuse and its volunteer workers. Although they found that support workers recognised, to a degree, the possibility of vicarious trauma and that the organisation attempted to provide support, stigma was still attached to admitting vulnerability.

Previous studies have explored resilience in relation to communities in terms of social organisation and adaptability, and community health and wellbeing drawing on the different dimensions outlined above (Ungar, 2011; Berkes and Ross, 2013). This study addresses understandings of resilience from the point of view of the CMs (who are in precarious employment or acting as volunteers) rather than from an organisational or management perspective. An advantage of taking this contextual approach to resilience is that it enables findings that extend beyond establishing whether resilience has developed to place greater attention on *how* it emerges.

Resilience and time

There is scant literature on the relationship between time and resilience, except for a body of work that associates health and wellbeing amongst youth with a future time orientation (FTO), meaning the ability to orientate oneself towards the future in thinking, planning and motivation (Crespo *et al.*, 2013). Researchers have found that young people with FTO tend to be less risk-taking (Stoddard *et al.*, 2011), have greater wellbeing (Johnson *et al.*, 2014), and that they have relatively higher academic achievement (Crespo *et al.*, 2013). These studies are based on the assumption that compliance with clock time and the ability to pursue a normative lifecourse trajectory are implicitly viewed as associated with resilient

behaviour. Where young people act on the basis of alternative temporal understandings, this is viewed as an adaptive strategy to adversity that requires intervention to enable the development of FTO (Hatala *et al.*, 2017).

Despite the evidence that suggests that young people with FTO are more likely to flourish, questions remain regarding the relevance and consistency of these findings across cultures and contexts (Killsback, 2013). Some cultures, for example, do not regard time as linear, perceiving time events that are important to communities or people as 'closer in time' even though they, when viewed chronically, have occurred a longer time ago (Janca and Bullen, 2003). A further aspect to this is that associating FTO with wellbeing may have been justifiable when resilience was viewed as enabling re-integration and enabling people to avoid future risks, but resilience is now increasingly being constructed through a social lens that encourages a view of adversity as an inevitable, even as a desirable, norm. Precariousness and the lack of ability to plan a lifecourse have come to be regarded as positive drivers of growth. It is ironic that the contemporary social imaginary, which arises from hegemonic understandings of resilience, stresses both the inherent unpredictability of life whilst continuing to emphasise the need to meet normative milestones throughout the biological/social human lifecycle. Paradoxically, members of marginalised communities, who are most likely to be subject to the forces which make this particular model life less achievable, are precisely the ones who are required to strive the most relentlessly towards it.

Methodology

The study was developed in collaboration with a third sector organisation, and with representatives of stakeholder organisations working collaboratively with the CMs, with the shared aim of reducing gang-related anti-social behavior among children and young people. Recruitment was via the co-chair of the third sector organisation who was approached by the researchers who explained that they were interested in investigating the CMs' understandings of resilience, personal resilience strategies and approaches to working with children and young people. The CMs were keen that their approaches to their work, sometimes seen as unorthodox by public and statutory organisations, should receive greater recognition.

After ethical approval had been granted by the University of Leeds, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 CMs, identified by the co-chair. The CMs were from a range of ethnic backgrounds and aged between 22 and 50. Only one of the CMs interviewed was a woman. Interviews were also conducted with seven stakeholders who worked regularly with CMs (not discussed in this paper) were identified through a purposive sampling strategy: these included members of the local authority, the Police, a Youth Offending Team, and other third sector organisations. The interviews, lasting between one and two hours, took place on the premises of the third sector organisation. The project was overseen by a co-operative enquiry group, chaired by the co-chair whom we had approached. The co-operative enquiry group met on a bimonthly basis and had responsibility for the strategic and partnership elements of project development.

Members of the wider WUN collaboration project met to create a shared semi-structured interview guide that could be adapted to different contexts. The interview schedule was divided into four broad areas, each introduced with a key framing question followed up by prompts to illicit more in-depth data. The first area of the interview schedule focused on the experiences in people's working and personal lives, and how they felt about their work within a particular community. The second area investigated understandings of personal resilience by asking questions about individual strengths and/or vulnerabilities, including sources of meaning and support in their lives. The third area focused on challenges and stressful aspects of life and work; and the final area probed understandings and interpretations of resilience. Whilst guided by the interview schedule, we were keen to allow space and opportunity for the research participants to introduce unanticipated elements, and we decided that flexibility should be in-built into the approach to the interviews in order to respond to new lines of enquiry that might open up.

The emphasis on openness was in part inspired by the work of Santos (2014), who calls for a new global sociology capable of challenging core concepts and categories through attentive listening to marginalised groups whose knowledge tends to remain unacknowledged within dominant discourses. In *Epistemologies of the South*, Santos (2014) argues that new knowledge is often organised along pre-defined conceptual categories that close down alternative ways of thinking about the world. To maintain openness, our approach to analysing the data followed Greene (2007, p. 15); we did not actively seek the triangulation of findings but aimed instead to identify nuanced understandings of resilience.

We analysed the data both deductively, guided by the original research questions, and inductively. Given the relatively small sample size of this UK-based study, the study does not offer generalisability in the normal sense applied in social science research. That said, although the interviewees were recruited via the co-chair of the third sector organisation, we interviewed the majority of CMs working with children and young people who were vulnerable to involvement in gang-related activities. Hopefully the study achieves verisimilitude, meaning that the reader feels that the experiences described are believable and lifelike and finds our analysis sufficiently convincing to merit further empirical exploration. Before presenting the findings, the conceptual framework, developed as a way of thinking meaningfully about the analysis, is outlined below. The conceptual framework outlines the relationship between hegemonic time (understood both as adherence to clock time and conformity with a linear lifecourse) with instrumental rationality, contrasting this with the temporal orientation of the CMs that is associated with an alternative form of rationality – namely, aesthetic rationality.

Conceptual framework

From the sixteenth century onwards the imprecise temporality provided by sunrise and sunset and the seasons became subordinate to clock time and the discipline associated with it, namely that activities should adhere to an abstractly fixed time plan external to the activities themselves (Adam, 1995). Clock time is based on certain assumptions: these are that time proceeds at a constant pace, and that it is measurable, divisible and linear. Elias (1992) argued that the introduction of clocks and calendars prompted the development of individual responsibility as a concept, encouraging people to take control of time by utilising it as productively as possible. Failure to adhere to the disciplinary framework of clock time on a daily basis is often interpreted as 'not coping'. The epithet 'time is money' requires the order of activities to adhere to an abstractly fixed time plan external to the activities themselves. For example, a class or seminar ends after a certain period of time has elapsed rather than when it comes to its natural completion.

In addition to clock time, the ascendancy of linear time is closely aligned with understandings of the lifecourse as a sequence of expected transitions through fixed development stages, incorporating childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age (Heinz, 2009). These transitions are institutionally regulated through schooling, employment and

marriage. Whilst interpretations of the lifecourse differ, (see for example, Berthoud and Gershuny, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Heinz, 2009) they tend to provide normative benchmarks for a 'successful' life. In other words, the lifecourse is seen as complying with temporal linearity and objectivity that exists beyond the experiences of individual people's lives. This is an understanding that, as discussed above, continues to inform understandings of children's and young people's health and wellbeing (Hatala *et al.*, 2017).

There is a further aspect to hegemonic time (understood both in terms of clock time and the lifecourse) that is of relevance to this study. Hegemonic time is, as indicated by Weber (1978), associated with instrumental rationality that has encouraged the conceptualisation of the world in terms of resources. All resources, including time, are accordingly valued in terms of their usefulness for achieving certain ends. As suggested in the findings below, this did not reflect the general orientation towards time of the CMs interviewed for this study as they appeared to adopt an aesthetic rather than an instrumental rationality, especially regarding their use of time.

Bologh (2009, p. 240) identifies aesthetic rationality as a mainly unacknowledged female form of rationality (in the sense that it is associated with domestic and communal relations), which is, in the broadest sense, appreciative of and responsive to beauty. This is not a reference merely to visual beauty but encompasses anything which 'attracts our feelings in a way that we deem desirable'. In other words, the ultimate gain is the realisation of a subjective sense of well-being – physical, social and emotional. Aesthetic rationality is other-orientated and associated with a temporal and deep engagement with the present rather than with a focus on direct outcomes (Fisher and Freshwater, 2014). Activities associated with aesthetic rationality include those which foster a person's sense of belonging. Whereas instrumental rationality seeks to be time efficient, aesthetic rationality encourages immediate responses and a generosity of time that is responsive to others. This evokes what Adam (1995, p. 94) has referred to as 'shadow times', which operate according to non-economic principles outside of the linear time of employment, and which cannot be forced into schedules and deadlines or easily assigned a monetary value. Shadow times are associated with caring activities in the private sphere rather than the measurable outcomes within public organisations. However, shadow times are still viewed (largely negatively) through the 'mediating filter of both the rationalized time of the Protestant ethic and the commodified time of the market' (Adam, 1995, p. 94).

Findings

Generosity of time

The CMs participating in this study did not embrace the fixed time plans associated with instrumental rationality; on the contrary, they viewed their commitment to their roles as temporally unlimited. Interventions with children and young people could not be planned according to a timetable but demanded instead a responsiveness to events as they arose. The CMs identified a state of ever readiness as essential in addressing situations of potential conflict. Being available to help out in such situations appeared to be central to the CMs sense of self and resilience in their role.   As one CM put it,

> I volunteer my time and I will be honest with you, it can be at three in the
> morning, you know? And sometimes being there from 1am to 3am is important,
> because the reality of losing a life, the impact that would have on me and that
> community outweighs the sleep that I've missed.

Similarly, another CM argued,

> …community mediators, they don't see it as a job, they see it as a way of life, in
> something, they don't have those nine to five boundaries, they have a sense of
> this is who I am.

On a number of occasions, the CMs emphasized the importance of seeing things through to their natural conclusion, 'Your session can't finish at 8pm if mediating is needed until midnight'. Success was based on preventing violence and, equally, on a value-led orientation to the nurturing of relationships. The CMs developed their personal sense of resilience through the meanings and values which they attributed to their work. As a CM explained,

> …the way I look at life is if I'm good to my fellow human beings, whether it be my
> neighbours, or the people I work with, or the people I service in my job, then I'll
> always be successful, regardless of how much money I have.

What is interesting in relation to the CMS' almost unlimited temporal availability is that despite the fact that although they were mainly male, these CMs demonstrated a 'round the clock' holistic engagement in others' wellbeing, traditionally associated with feminist aesthetic rationality.

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Masculine identities and aesthetic rationality

If the CMs' adoption of aesthetic rationality appears unsurprising, it should not be overlooked that many have pasts which include phases of involvement in masculine forms of aggression, particularly in gang related behaviour. Indeed, the CMs' credibility with children and young people stemmed partly from their lived experience of violent and aggressive involvements. As one CM put it, 'People were really scared of me round here.' He went on to explain that it was his 'scary' image that had previously prevented him from engaging in and enjoying authentic relationships. The resultant loneliness prompted his ability – or resilience – to embark on a new life with new values. Nevertheless, personal experience in gang-related activities tended to be viewed as a valuable resource for present engagement, with CMs speaking about how their experiences of gang membership gave them unique insights and a 'feel for the game'. Another CM explained,

> ...and it's just personal experience, being confident enough to stand there and
> hear that stuff and I'm thinking yeah, all right here, I'm not, although this is a bit,
> a little bit edgy, I don't feel physically threatened, but if I do, what am I going to
> do about that? So there's a sort of being able to judge situations quality, I think
> that's really important.

The ability and desire to engage spontaneously in unanticipated situations of conflict was, however, linked to a strong desire to engage in what might be termed value-led practice. A sense of 'doing the right thing' was clearly related to the CMs' sense of self, and this prompted a brave response in the face of imminent risk. From this perspective, risk was not evaluated but responded to in the moment, as expressed here:

> There were some men, a couple of Asians, some white lads and they came to
> rush into this house. And I stood there and I said 'over my dead body, you're not
> going through here. Because what do you want to do? You're going to go into a
> grandma's house to do what?'

Within this discourse, resilience was associated both with an ability to cope with conflict, and, equally, and with an openness and empathy for others, which had developed through personal experience of adversity, as pointed out by the CM quoted below.

> I have grown up around it [conflict] and I don't feel threatened when someone is
> ranting or if they're feeling blinded, or acting very hostile. I don't take

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judgement of them either. Some of my best friends, there's kids growing up with

the type of kids that people used to look at and think: they're problems. They're

bad apples. I've always had a good understanding of people like that, because

when I was a kid, I could be a bit of a problem as well, right... I'm not

judgemental. I want to understand people, I'm still trying to develop as a

mediator who helps people to understand each other.

The lack of readiness to judge appears to be related to the CMs' own life trajectories that had mainly not be based on normative lifecourse progression, furnishing them perhaps with a greater willingness to see the potential in children and young people.

Rather than criticising current behaviour and/or young people's lack of 'legitimate' future goals, CMs identified the quality of relationships as key to fostering resilience in themselves and in others. These were frequently seen as inter-related objectives. A CM explained,

So I started youth work. I found it really warm, because the first youth work, my

old man passed at the time, so it's part and parcel of life, but I think what I

needed was some warmth, some comfort, some TLC. And I found it in my youth

work.

One CM explained that he hoped his work would enable,

....people [to] begin to see the situation differently. So that builds, if you like their

personal resilience, because they begin to understand things differently, see

things, so they don't see their neighbour in the way they were. They begin to get

to know them and recognise they're not the sort of stereotype they thought.

Resilience, from the perspective above, is based on fostering an openness to 'otherness' and to diversity, a form of embodied generosity that contrasts with instrumental rationality, which can encourage alienated approaches characterised by docility towards authority, and aggression or disparagement when dealing with subordinates or when confronted by those who hold alternative values and competitors (Berman, 1984).

Difficulties of working with other agencies

The CM interviewees spoke about how their non-adherence to normative clock time caused tensions in their work in relation to collaborating with public and statutory services,

I've only just been told that social services, when you're finished, you've finished.
You're not to ring a client, you're not to see him, and I thought well what if Joe
Blog rings me and says I've got no food. Whether to bring an after service to him
or not? What if he's got no credit?

Another CM, in relation to some members of the study's co-operative enquiry group, pointed out,

I think from our steering group point of view, when you put these elements on
the table, they're coming from a very bureaucratic way of working, and that
bureaucracy has been built in to safeguard themselves as well as their workers
from litigation and all the rest of it. When you show them, you know, we're
available practically twenty four hours a day, it's like 'I'm the duty manager' and
that means that 'I will have to be inconvenienced to manage my work while
they're out at two o'clock in the morning'.

One CM provided a particularly powerful example of the very differing temporal orientation of CMs compared with many working for public and statutory services. He explained a particular incident in which two police officers were sitting in a police car awaiting reinforcement whilst a situation of conflict developed on the street,

…two policemen in a police car, but they called for reinforcements, they didn't
do anything other than sit there, because they had got some protocol that said
you don't intervene, so they just sat there. And the people I spoke to, they were
really angry that the police were sitting there doing nothing and the police had
called the heavy lot, you know, the armed lot.

In addition, the interviewee related that a CM had become involved in order to prevent violence and to protect the young people. Whilst this approach was successful in defusing conflict, it was not appreciated by the police as it contravened official protocols on the basis of risk. This type of unorthodox approach in which CMs engage spontaneously on the basis of their experiential judgement and a 'feel for' the situation recurred throughout the interviews. Disquiet at the CMs' non-adherence to protocol was clearly related to their 'anti-social' pasts. One member of the steering group commented that the CMs continued to be assessed on the basis of their pasts by colleagues within public and statutory organisations.

Aesthetic rationality

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Reflecting an orientation towards aesthetic rationality, the CMs' apprehension of the world appeared to be similarly focused on promoting present wellbeing within their communities rather than negotiating concrete goals in the future. Whilst some may criticise such an approach as short-sighted, the open-endedness of the future was identified as a source of hopefulness,

> Obviously I don't think we're at our final resting place, we've got a long way to
>
> go, but I like the journey. I think the journey through these things is as important
>
> as where you went, I mean the one feeds the other

The traditional model of engagement with excluded groups is that resilience is achieved by imposing a blueprint for an improved life. Young people especially are encouraged to be future-orientated. These CMs, in contrast, distanced themselves from adopting a 'congealed persona' themselves or expecting others to conform to a model of predictable behaviour or development. In one community mediator's words, 'Engaging positively with children and young people' is more productive 'than just trying to prise them away from gangs'. Relationships were invariably identified as key to resilience,

> So, it's around discussion and kind of meeting people, rather than having people
>
> sat in their houses by themselves. We give them a call.

Another explained, '…a major part of what we do is to make those connections'. Connections were viewed as central to 'enabling people to be part of the community without being afraid'. Community resilience was therefore about connections, with the acknowledgement that building these requires a tolerance of a wide range of views, including a generosity to be attentive to perspectives which may initially come across as offensive, as expressed by a CM below,

> …we've got to have an environment, in my view, where people aren't afraid to
>
> talk - aren't afraid to say something in case they're accused of being racist, or
>
> accused of being silly or stupid…

For the CMs, fostering resilience involved accepting that life and human beings are inherently multi-faceted and crucially, part of an interconnected social system. The focus is not on individuals but on the network of relationships in which they are embedded, with rugged individualism yielding to a more relational self. The relational self is necessarily embedded in the present moment as it demands engaging with others' points of view as part of an open and relational act (Gergen, 2009).

Discussion

A new way of looking at resilience?

In empirical studies on chronic illness and on disability, Davies (1997) and others (Ezzy 2000, Fisher and Goodley 2007, Fisher and Lees, 2015) have used the term 'the philosophy of the present' to describe how some participants in the course of reckoning with illness or disability came to develop an appreciation of the present that resists dominant notions of linear time and embraces uncertainty, seeing hopefulness and openness with it. A similar orientation towards the present in relational terms appears to be embedded within many of the CMs' sense of self. This may be associated with a sense of resilience which emerges through a form of aesthetic engagement rather than adherence to instrumental rationality associated with linear clock time and/or adherence to a future orientated lifecourse. Living in the moment should not be understood as passivity: on the contrary it enabled these CMs to make tremendous context-dependent efforts to rise to demands and challenges, but it did so without demanding (from either themselves or others) long-term, authoritative, context-transcending life goals. Linear time was replaced with a situationally open 'event-open time praxis', but it was fully reflexive. The tempo and length of events and connected actions with children and young people, and with their communities more broadly, were no longer determined according to an overall plan or an abstract, linear conception of time, but in a flexible and situation-dependent way.

Personal resilience and fostering resilience in others involved a value-led orientation towards others which defied the traditional private/public dichotomy.   In short, much of the CMs' personal sense of resilience, as well as their approaches towards promoting resilience in others, reflected many of the principles associated with a feminist ethic of care (see Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 2000) that emphasises the contribution of often unacknowledged caring (across the private and public spheres) to society as a whole. A key aspect of the feminist ethic of caring is that future outcomes yield to an attentiveness to alleviating suffering and promoting wellbeing in the present. As Adam (1995) has pointed out, this lack of future orientation tends to be disparaged as no definitive end results can necessarily be identified.

This raises the question as to whether resilience that owes much to aesthetic rationality has the potential to contribute to new approaches within the delivery of social

care, or even to contribute to broader social change beyond the communities in which it is embedded. Alternatively, does resilience informed by aesthetic rationality merely shore up the status quo, reinforcing marginalisation by making it more bearable? This is considered below.

Towards professional and/or social change?

In the age of modernity adherence to linear time and to the achievement of normative milestones made a certain sense. Whilst myriad forms of social injustice were common in the modern period, there was, nevertheless, some confidence that society was seeking to organise itself in order to protect people from some of life's existential insecurities (Southwick *et al.*, 2011; Evans and Reid, 2014). Against the background of a social imaginary which encourages stable horizons of expectations it made sense for people to make long-term plans and investments, and these were indispensable for numerous modernization processes. The current erosion of those institutions and orientations challenges modernist alignments towards planning and linear progress. Where modernity once appeared to provide the promise of progression and worldly transformation, (neo) liberalism thrives on insecurity (Hartmut, 2013; Evans and Reid, 2014). People are expected to view unpredictability and precariousness positively and to see within these conditions opportunities for personal growth and development, and marginalised individuals and marginalised communities are expected to develop individual responses to socially generated problems. The resilient subject within (neo) liberalism is not a political subject who offers resistance, but, rather a subject who strives for maximum adaptability whilst accepting the necessity of precariousness as a private good (Hartmut, 2013).

To return to the CMs, it could easily be asserted that their temporal orientation towards the present may be an adaptive response to both the insecurity of the present and the uncertainty of the future. In calming situations of conflict and disorder within marginalised communities, CMs were arguably tacitly accepting the political status quo: most offered no objection to the view that communities should *assume* responsibility for their own wellbeing. The CMs had little to say regarding the retrenchment of social welfare in the UK, and, ostensibly, they were motivated through concern for social conditions rather than by political aspirations. Arguably, this could be seen as related to relative powerlessness. For example, in Desmond's (2017) *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the*

American City tenants facing eviction in the near future are described as dwelling in the present, psychologically blocking the reality that they would be homeless in the near future. Whilst it is possible that CMs had adopted an orientation to the present that was as an adaptive response to marginalisation, the CMs can, on the other hand, be regarded as offering resistance to prevailing notions of resilience, particularly strategies associated with resilience in the workplace.

Conclusion

In a society which is now characterised by precariousness (particularly for marginalised groups), people are expected to respond by constantly updating skills and being on the lookout for opportunities (Hartmut, 2013). In the face of these pressures, there is often a sense that there is little time available for genuinely valuable activities. The 'deadline' determines the serial order of activities and, as time is scarce, goals that are not bound to time deadlines are lost from view. As a result, people spend their time, by and large, on activities which they consider hold little value or which give them little satisfaction (Hartmut, 2013).

Clock time is as dominant as ever, but at an ever increasing pace, and with a dislocation between time imperatives and the activities which people value. Without questioning the underlying values of what they are doing, people must ensure that they complete tasks according to time efficient schedules whilst acquiring a panoply of skills that are transferable from one workplace to another. Resilience is thus defined as a skill set that can be efficiently implemented without further reflection on the values that underpin it. This type of resilience is sometimes viewed primarily in terms of survivability (Evans and Reid, 2014), a perspective that may resonate with many who work in public and statutory organisations, including those who came into contact (and, sometimes conflict, with CMs). The problem with this view of resilience is that it does not necessarily provide opportunities for creative responses and for relationships. With their embrace of aesthetic rationality the CMs in our study were arguably transcending the instrumental rationality that characterise much work in public organisations. As a result, they were able to access resilience in a relational form generated through *being with* a person (Gergen, 2009). This may not in itself amount to organised resistance to the status quo, but it is a form of resilience which steps

outside other models which maintain the binary between self and others, placing instead the primary emphasis on relationships.

Transferring the results from this study, which focuses on a specific group of service providers in a particular context, into recommendations for broader application would be problematic. Nevertheless, our findings may be timely given growing global recognition that public services should be reformed towards greater power-sharing in the form of co-production (OECD, 2011; Dominelli, 2016; Plotnikov, 2016. Fisher *et al.*, 2017). Co-production rejects top-down approaches that shore up democratic deficits in the delivery of services in favour of more equal dialogue that values processes as well as outcomes (Pestoff, 2006). It may be that there are lessons to be learned from CMs who work *with* others and promote dialogue with others and between alienated groups without imposing a template of required outcomes. Whilst such an approach necessitates a high level of availability that may be problematic to reproduce in public services, it seems that the CMs' ethos of aesthetic rationality evident in our study was generating forms of resilience (in their communities and amongst themselves) that do not close down possibilities for dialogue and co-action.

The CMs who participated in this study demonstrated a form of resilience based on aesthetic rationality, associated with a particular alertness to relational wellbeing in the present. By focusing in an open and fluid way on relationships rather than on 'fixing' people's identities according to a given blueprint or imposing future goals, the CMs engaged in a process which provided the potential for mutual transformation. This appeared to avoid the narcissism which can sometimes be associated with care of the self as well as the imperative to care for the other, which is based on a self/other split. Whilst this does not in itself constitute a strategy for immediate and radical change, it demands a sensitivity to people in the 'here and now', and it avoids foreclosing people's identities by pronouncing the last word. This is an enactment of resilience in which the unanticipated at least remains open.

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