

Humans or Robots?  
Nurturing a resilient and  
compassionate culture in  
social work teams

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# My research

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Small scale qualitative research

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Topic - the emotional resilience of social workers in local authority adult services in Scotland

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Interviews with 28 social workers and 8 managers

Diary entries completed by the social workers

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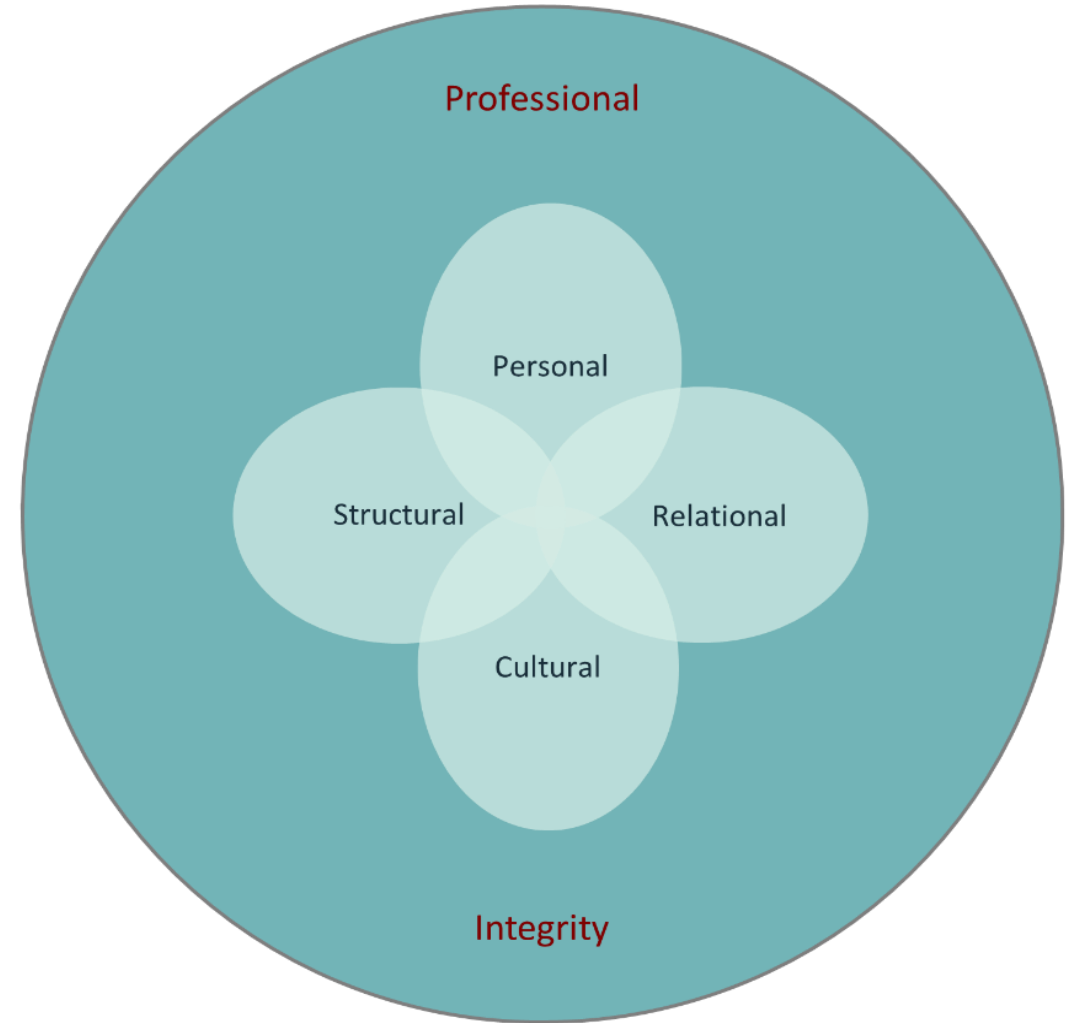
Exploring experiences of resilience – broadly about coping with and adapting to adversity

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Creation of a framework of resilience based on Neil Thompson's 'PCS' model (2006)

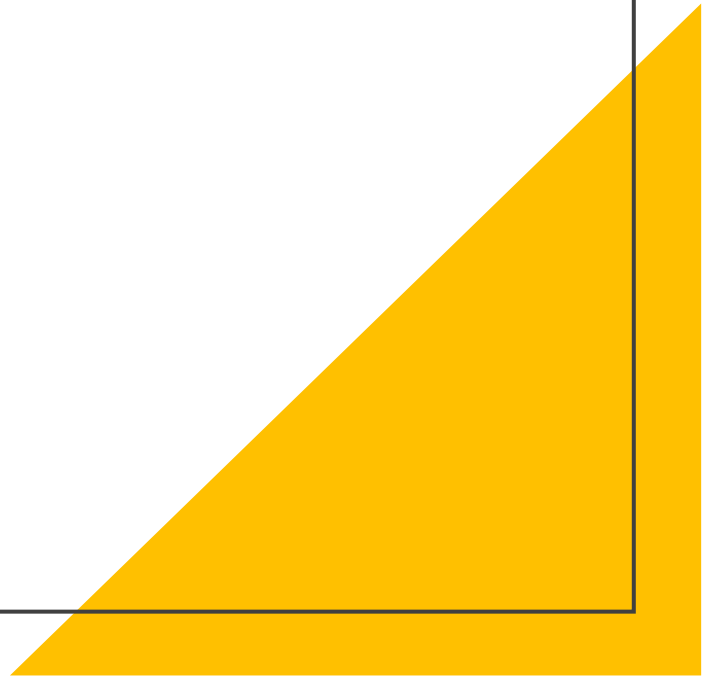
# Framework of resilience

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# What is culture?

In Thompson's PCS model, the cultural level refers to  
*“shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing”* and  
*“conformity to social norms”* (Thompson, 2006, p.27)



# Managerialist culture

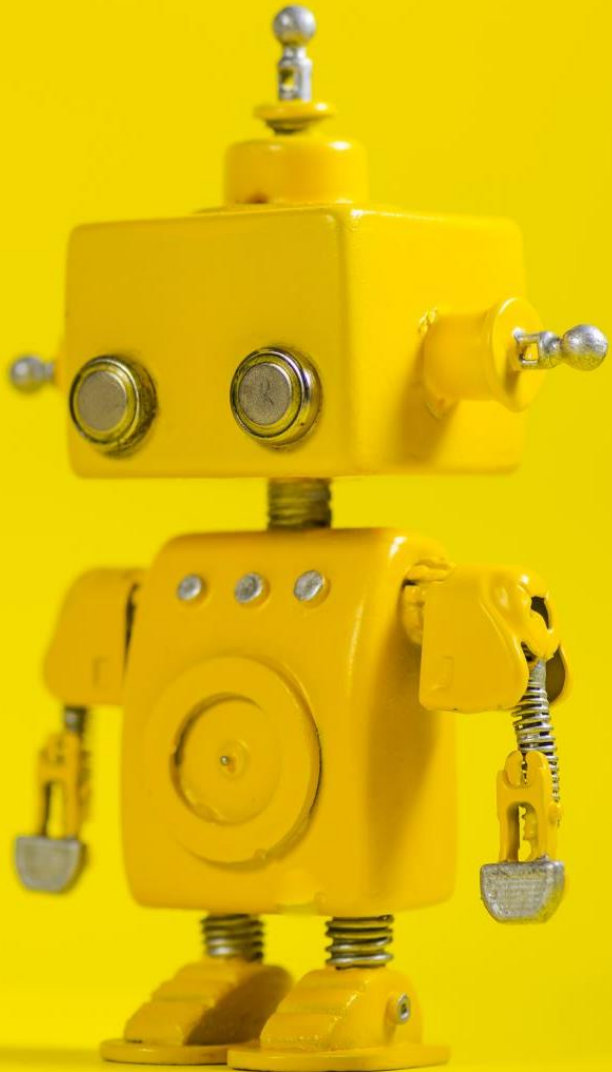
The culture of social work is often said to be one of 'managerialism'

This culture began to emerge in the 1980s within a 'neoliberal' political agenda of individualism and a market-based economy

Service users are deemed to be consumers in a mixed economy of care and social workers become 'care managers'

Organisational priorities are efficiency, economy, targets and performance indicators

Skills emphasised are 'rational-technical' rather than relationship skills and ethical values



# Robot social workers

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Importance of social workers being treated as individuals with their own needs and finite capacities, rather than a cog in the wheel of the organisational machine

*“We’re not machines, you know. We’re not computers but all they’re interested in is being seen to be meeting the stats, meeting the requirements” (Linda)*

*“We’re just like robots to be used until we drop” (Lily)*

# Depersonalisation of service users

- Service users can also be depersonalised within the context of organisational culture

*“They reduce the skill level to one of automaton. You know they’re actually just churning assessments and not properly engaging with people as clients as they used to do. I think that’s a problem because that’s where you can reduce people to names and from names to numbers, and it’s about how many cases have you got as opposed to how many problems have the people got. I think the pyramid is on its head (Peter, Manager)*

- Importance of the more ‘human’ elements of social work amid the ‘robotic’ automaton of bureaucratic tasks and procedures - key source of job satisfaction for social workers and quality of service provided

# Bureaucracy and relationship-based practice

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Organisational procedure and bureaucracy perceived to stifle good social work practice

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*“The tail wagging the dog” (Jill)* - administrative tasks take precedence over the welfare of service users

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Social workers can be in a *“bureaucratically preoccupied state”* during direct contact with families, which affects interpersonal engagement and the quality of the assessment undertaken (Ferguson, 2017, p.1019)

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The Munro review of child protection in England referred to a culture in which *“the more important part of social work is carried out on a computer”* (Munro, 2011, p.36)



# What is social work anyway?

- Importance of relationships and engagement with service users
- What is the role of bureaucracy and procedure – is it social work?

*“I really enjoyed it and relished in doing such an activity and it made me feel more like a social worker (Eilidh – diary entry about using communication and counselling skills during a visit to a carer)”*

*“I hadn’t forgotten how to be a social worker” (Linda)*

- Dissonance in role and values has been linked to stress and burnout (Rajan-Rankin, 2014) and is an important consideration in nurturing a more resilient organisational culture

# Outcomes – whose outcomes?

Service user and organisational outcomes – are they the same?

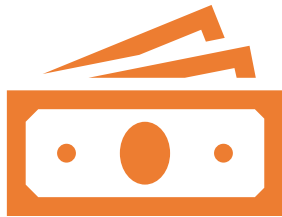
*“Ticking items of a list” (Zoe)*

*“I’ve never had anybody say to me in my social work career, you didn’t tick my box properly” (Peter, Manager)*

*“The deployment of outcomes can serve as a seeming assurance of efficiency. This is to the detriment of less technocratic, softer, more uncertain, yet more realistic and humanist, efforts to describe change and growth”(Clapton, 2020, p.223)*

The importance of process as well as outcomes – e.g., building relationships of trust

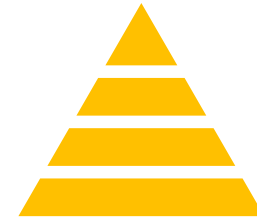
# Re-humanising social work



Not just financial austerity but relational  
austerity too



Relationships as a fundamental resource



‘Righting’ the pyramid – compassionate  
relationships at the broad base of social  
work

# Emotions and professionalism

The emotional impact of social work – risk of burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma

Importance of debriefing and emotional processing

Peer support is particularly valued

*“It's so powerful because it makes everyone feel, I'm important, people do want to hear how I'm doing, I'm not just a machine” (Emily)*

Managerialist social work is *“valorising practitioners who are emotionally self-regulating and distant”* (Morley et al, 2019, p.143)

Emotions and emotional expression should be seen as a part of professionalism (van Heugten, 2011) and integral to assessment and decision-making (de Boise and Hearn, 2017)

# Shared emotional experience

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## Reassurance of normalising emotional responses

*“It’s absolutely fine to have a little cry because you’re stressed or you’re angry or you’re tired, you’re exhausted. Have a little cry, it’s fine” (Julie)*

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## Dangers of over-normalising

*“People feel reassured that, well we’re all in it together, everybody’s feeling the same, I’m crying in the corner occasionally but so is somebody else” (Hazel, Manager)*

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## Normal doesn't mean ‘harmless’ – finding a healthy baseline

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## Emotional contagion – the pitfalls of sharing negative emotion



# Emotionally intelligent organisations



Just as individuals can be said to be emotionally intelligent so too can organisations (Rajan-Rankin, 2014)



Importance of recognising the place of emotion in all aspects of social work practice from engaging with service users to carrying out assessments and making decisions



Maintain an awareness of the emotional impact of the social work role



Encourage open expression and respond with empathy, compassion and concern

# Small group discussion

In small groups, reflect on your own workplace culture in relation to:

- ❖ managerialism and bureaucracy
- ❖ humanity, compassion and relationship-based practice
- ❖ the place of emotion in social work

# Professional identity



Professional identity is about the roles, tasks and values of the profession, and feeling a sense of belonging

It's not necessarily static - it can change and be influenced by workplace factors (Webb, 2016)



# Professional integrity

Professional integrity (being true to one's values and practising in an ethical way) - closely linked to professional identity

Resilience derived from doing one's job well and ethically

All-Ireland study into the professional identity of social workers – importance of adherence to values such as anti-oppressive practice, respect for diversity, empowerment (BASW NI, IASW, Northern Ireland Social Care Council and Coru, 2020)

# Uniqueness of the social work role

Pride in the uniqueness of social work

*"You're hearing things that are outside the realm of most people's life experience" (Melanie)*

Doing something special

Sense of solidarity among social workers

Sharing the stories of "you'll never guess what happened?!"

# Interdisciplinary working

Rewards and challenges of interdisciplinary working

Threats to the distinct professional identity of social work

A 'shrinking', 'diluting' and 'erosion' of the social work role within integrated services

*"It's a bit like health is this massive oil tanker and we're just the ferry boat. We're not equal in size but we've got to go parallel with each other. It almost feels like they're dragging us along with them to go in their direction and we don't have the strength to pull them in our direction" (Tom)*

The status of social work can be low compared to other professions – treated as a 'second-class citizen' and 'poor sibling'

# Clarity of role and identity

Belief among other professionals that *“every task is a social work task”* (Linda) and an expectation that they will *“be all things to all people”* (Katie, Manager)

But social workers also excluded from decision-making processes on occasions

Different approaches and underlying ethical principles within professional disciplines

*“The problem is they see social work as not doing their job properly because this is what they think a social worker should do and we are crap at it because we’re not doing what they think we should”* (Lizzie)

In order to convey a clear and positive professional identity, the social work profession itself needs greater clarity about the role

# Feeling valued

Important to value different skill sets within interdisciplinary working, but sometimes social work is *“a square peg being made to fit into a round hole”* (Tom)

Feeling valued by one's own organisation – compensation for the 'personal cost' of the role

Wellbeing strategies promoted by organisations were seen as useful but tokenistic (“a sticking plaster”) without fundamental issues of working conditions being addressed

# Being creative

- According to Beddoe, *“the profession of social work hovers in uncomfortable places, always caught between transformative aspirations and bureaucratic constraints”* (2010, p.1292)
- *“I think social work used to be a very broad creative kind of job and I think it’s shrunk to little more than people policing and accessing finance”* (Lizzie)
- Manipulation of bureaucratic procedures to be adaptable and creative in response to service users and their unique situations
- However, it can be difficult to go against the ‘rules’ in a culture of blame and accountability
- Morley et al (2019) advocate for social work practice that promotes creativity, emotional intelligence and critical thinking rather than rigid adherence to formulaic rules that can characterise managerialist cultures.

*“Why pay human social workers to do this work when robots (who apparently do not suffer the same impediment of thinking or the limitations of emotion and, instead, calculate precisely according to the algorithm with which they are programmed) can do this technical role much more accurately and efficiently than humans”*  
(Morley et al, 2019, p.144)

# Small group discussion

In small groups, reflect on your own workplace culture in relation to:

- ❖ positive professional identity
- ❖ professional integrity
- ❖ feeling valued
- ❖ creativity and flexibility



Any questions?



# References

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