

# Resilience, The Developmental Model And Hope

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**Ray Lemay** is the Executive Director of the Prescott-Russell Services to Children and Adults in Plantagenet, Ontario, Canada. He is widely-published and has written extensively on normalisation and Social Role Valorization Theory (SRV). On a recent visit to Australia in 2005, Ray conducted a workshop in Brisbane, entitled 'Promoting Resilience'. In this article, Ray explores the concept of resilience and discusses links between resilience theory and the protective processes that enable people to successfully adapt and develop, following situations of adversity.

The surprising story of twins, Andrei and Vanya, was published in 1976 by Jarmila Koluchova, the psychologist who supervised their care, following their discovery. They had been kept locked up in an unheated basement or in a closet and were often brutalised by their parents. The neighbours did not even know they existed. When they were discovered by child protection authorities, they had stunted growth, little language, significant fine and gross motor delays and rickets. The child protection authorities assessed them as having IQs of 40 and concluded that the years of severe deprivation and abuse would leave these children with mental and physical disabilities for life. However, when Andrei and Vanya were placed in the foster care of a single woman, who provided a loving and stable environment, they quickly developed alongside their peers in the regular classroom. The most recent information on the twins is that they completed tertiary study, are married and have children: there is no evidence of any long-term negative effects from their early experiences. Koluchova believes that the simple provision of normative family life allowed the twins to bounce back and develop positively.

Koluchova's study of Andrei and Vanya created quite a stir in the 1970s and challenged the pessimistic dogma that still today animates much of human service. Is the story of the Koluchova twins exceptional or does it hint at something else of which we need to take account?

In the field of human services there seems to be a general pessimism about the outcomes of children and adults who have known serious adversity, including abused and neglected children and adults, or people who are born with or acquire significant disabilities. Human service professionals often assume that people with disabilities or others who have experienced serious abuse, neglect and rejection will not do well and develop responses and interventions based on this assumption. Yet how well might they do in life? Might they develop positively? What about their developmental potential? How might human service responses or interventions counteract people's experience of systematic devaluation?

In 1972, Wolf Wolfensberger suggested that providing people with normative levels of activity and normative life circumstances would have a beneficial impact on their competence. Indeed, he suggested that the people who would benefit most from such improved circumstances would be individuals who show the most significant levels of impairment and that even intellectual functioning could be dramatically improved. More recently, Wolfensberger described a developmental model of service based on a certain number of important assumptions about human beings. Among these assumptions, he noted that the developmental potential of individual human beings is very difficult to assess and he proposed that a person's developmental potential is only realisable in circumstances where life conditions and experiences are optimised.

In addition, in 1988, Wolfensberger proposed that people with intellectual disabilities have a number of, what he terms, 'common assets', that are, by and large, repressed by their current, often degrading life circumstances which may include dehumanisation and brutalisation. The same seems to be true of

people who have other disabilities or who have experienced severe trauma. It is not so much the disability or the trauma that represses positive development, but rather the continuing devaluation that they experience along their life paths. This train of thought suggests that a person might overcome much past adversity by simply experiencing typical or indeed valued life experiences and conditions (the good things in life), with all of the attendant roles and activities.

Longitudinal studies of cohorts of children growing into adulthood and middle age have generally confirmed that early difficulties in life, vulnerabilities and risks are generally overcome in later years. Eminent researchers and theoreticians have consistently identified resilience as a key factor in overcoming adversity. Indeed, psychologist, Martin Seligman, states that the general consensus is that there is no single childhood event that predicts future adult outcomes and Albert Bandura concludes that psychological theories generally over-predict psychopathology. One important longitudinal study documents how children who were born into significant disadvantage have done much better than anyone would have predicted. This study has been following 837 children born in 1955 on the island of Kauai. The men and women of this cohort identified that the informal support and advice they received from friends, families, colleagues and others was of far greater importance to their development than any support, advice or treatment from professionals, such as social workers or psychologists.

Similarly, resilience researchers, Ann and Alan Clarke conclude that it is the simple improvement of life circumstances and life experiences that leads to remarkable improvements in developmental outcomes. Resilience researcher, Ann Masten, defines resilience as 'good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development'. She comments on the ordinariness of the phenomena suggesting that, by and large, resilience is the result of *ordinary magic*: 'Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships and in their communities'. This is quite in keeping with many de-institutionalisation studies which find that, in the medium term, after individuals with intellectual disabilities are moved from institutions to community residences, they generally exhibit marked improvements in adaptive behaviours. Many of these persons, mid-life and despite intellectual impairment develop new competencies.

Not only is resilience research and resilience theory consistent with our day-to-day experience, it is also wholly consistent with the developmental model as it is explained in Social Role Valorization Theory (SRV). Many individuals who are the subject of much devaluation and wounding resist heroically. Resilience research documents that ending adversity on the one hand and improving life conditions and experiences on the other, goes a long way towards moving people back onto positive developmental paths and towards achieving their potential, irrespective of age. Thus, the attribution of valued social roles and the experience of the good things in life will help an individual bounce back and liberate his or her developmental potential.

The story of the Koluchova twins is not about two remarkable children – a rare exception to the rule that the experience of adversity inevitably will have negative long-term effects. Rather, it is much more hopeful, hinting that we need to take seriously the assumptions of the developmental model: that all human beings are capable of remarkable resilience and stories like Andrei and Vanya's should not be viewed as anomalies but rather as the expected outcome of intervention. When Social Role Valorization Theory underpins the application of formal and informal measures, we can predict dramatic increases in competency and important developmental progress for the person, regardless of their disability, No matter what, we cannot presume to know the limits of a person's developmental potential. Resilience research and resilience theory should inspire our positive expectancies for individuals and push us to create the opportunities required to maximize developmental potential. Resilience should be the expected outcome and all our interventions should be animated by hope.

*References for this article and a bibliography of works published by Ray Lemay are available on request from CRU.*

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