

Building Family Resilience- A Social Work Approach

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Abstract In this paper a social work approach to build family resilience is discussed. Families are considered as the units of strength or interchangeably as units of resilience. While members of the family may be individually focused it is often the collective unit – the family and its strengths or resilience that turns into an area of intervention for social work. This paper explores the concept of family resilience being an active process of endurance, self-righting and growth response to crises and challenges. With specific focus on ‘Save a Family Plan’, which is an international Non-Government Organisation, the authors will outline the review findings of the core strategies directed towards strengthening family empowerment. Furthermore, this paper will describe relevant programs aimed at poverty amelioration and, how through well-coordinated agendas, social workers are able to infuse resilience behaviours in families thereby creating positive change. The authors will provide empirically based evidence which affirms their belief that in assisting with coping and building resilience has led to empowerment in the families and communities in India. .

Keywords Family Resilience, Family Empowerment, Social Work Community

Introduction and Theoretical Background

This paper is empirically based and has utilized qualitative methodologies in this study in the form of in-depth interviews of professionals working with families in the field of community development as part of Save a Family Plan. The study has been conducted with a grounded theory approach. A brief but succinct literature review is provided to support the concepts canvassed. Save a Family Plan (SAFP) is an international registered charitable organization based in Canada, with a purpose of establishing social justice and change for poor families (Save a family Plan, 2010). Its programs are directed towards poverty eradication and promotion of health and education; family resilience approach is conducive to its outcomes as it demands the

integration of community and the families. Though these core areas would facilitate the resilience of the families, only strengthened families would be able to sustain and adapt to the changes that happen in the community (SAFP 2010). In this context it is momentous to understand the social work practice approach in Save a Family Plan in India. SAFP works in partnership with various government agencies and local institutions in Canada and India. It was started in 1965 in Kerala, the southernmost state of India by helping five poor families and then it was expanded to many parts of India. ‘The aim of SAFP was to meet basic needs of poor families and to encourage them to move toward self-reliance in order to become full, contributing members of their local community’ (SAFP, 2010, website). Professional Social Workers are appointed as regional program officers and field coordinators to implement the family development program. Poverty alleviation, self-reliance and family development are the core strategies adopted by SAFP. How do social workers develop the resilience of the families? What are the strategies they adopt and how do families cope with adverse situations? The answers to these questions are some of the major areas of interest in this study.

The contemporary family studies and interventions have started in the progressive era and Social Work practice finds it imperative to work with families as it connects individuals and the community. Working with families is very crucial as there are no substitutes for families. Pauline B., William J. D., Ralph, Walter, and Suzanne K.S. suggest that practitioners and scholars started viewing families as endangered institutions that required social theory and social therapy conducted by social workers (2004). Pauline et al, referring to Harold Christensen, classify the scientific studies on family into four stages; pre-research, prior to 1850, library research (second half of the nineteenth century), emerging science (in the first half of the twentieth century) and the ‘systematic theory building’, after 1950. During the third stage family as a small unit with interaction became the focal point of many researchers and scholars. Multiple elements have been brought under family related studies since then. Ernest W. Burgess (cited by Neenan, 2009), considered by many to be the founder of family studies in 1920s, highlights the significance of the psycho-social elements of family in his book titled ‘Family as a unity of interacting personalities’.

The role of individual behaviour and personality components are emphasized as the essential factors of family functioning. Some of the theoretical models developed and applied in the family studies; are Structural-functionalism, the interactional and situational approaches, family developmental theory and the institutional approaches. These theories support several ideas: firstly, relationships are considered one of the most important strengths of the healthy families. 'Although families have roles and functions, their main values are in the relationships which are irreplaceable' (McGoldrick, Carter, Gracia-Preto, 2011: 1). Secondly, relationships and interactions between the members of the families are considered the cornerstone of many intervention programs and therapies with their application towards an individualistic approach. Thirdly, community development approaches to family empowerment and resilience that assist in dealing with children and their development (Clauss S. and Mark D. 2004).

Many transitions have happened to the family system across the cultures and societies. 'Globally, in all cultures, the position of the family has been redefined. Yet despite disturbing statistics of the gradual disintegration of the urban middleclass family and erosion of family values resulting in a paradigm shift, the need for familial bonding has simultaneously re-emerged, debunking the notion that contemporary times register the death of the family' (Dasgupta and Lal. 2007 : 12). This shift is evident in the Indian families too. The global changes have re-situated and altered the very traditional role and structure of the family. Studies conducted by Desai and Thakkar (2001) Dasgupta Lal (2007) among the middle class families in India provide authentication to the above assertions. Still the strength of the families to keep and protect its individual is acclaimed and the family has the strength to cater for/to the emotional and interdependence needs. An individual is known by his family name in the community and it is hard to find individuals without a family name or an address (Dasgupta et al. 2007). It is with this very reason that many social workers, policy makers, media and social activists focus on the strengths of the families to link individuals to community.

Strengths based practice approach in social work encompasses the strengths of the families to mould and shape the individuals too. '.....resilience as more than just a list of personal strengths, they outline a theory of how family, school, community, and even national and cultural mores shape the resilience of the person...' (Pulla., Shatte, and Warren, 2013: XI). A resilient family is empowered to mould the individuals and contribute to the community by making effective use of the community resources. Indian families exist with its traditional practices and bonds as it is capable of 'bouncing back' from adversities. It is said to be a vital competency of success in the strengths based practice in Social Work (Pulla, 2013). The natural 'bounce back' can be called the coping strategies of the family. Effective and natural coping strategies of the family reflect the resilience of the families to help out its individuals and the community

to come out of adversities. Strengths based practitioners view families as a unit of strength rather than viewing as the context for the individual's resilience (Nichols, 2013). Referring to Patterson, Walsh defines family resilience as including 'the dynamic process that fosters positive adaptation of the family unit and its members in the context of significant adversity' (Walsh 2013: 66). Developing resilience of the family is indeed the fundamental approach of community development practitioners as it endorses the community participation and planning at the community levels. The internal factors like role clarification, financial stability, education of the members are crucial in dealing with the families and communities. Promoting resilience calls for socio-economic, behavioural and political ramifications of the family and it is mostly achieved through identifying and listening to their coping strategies. Some literature states that developing resilience shows how people can find constructive ways of dealing with their difficulties by using the techniques of cognitive behavioural therapy as well as listening to the wisdom of those who have prevailed over adversity (Neenan 2009: i). Community based interventions also stress the magnitude of developing resilience to the families, especially when facing serious challenges by the families and communities (Walsh, 2013).

Research Methods and Data Collection

In order to study the social work strategies and approaches Social Workers adopt in developing the resilience of families in India, a qualitative study was employed by the researcher. A semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted among the professional Social Workers, working in SAFF, as Regional Program Officers (RPOs). A group discussion was also facilitated by the researcher during the study.

The participants in the study were RPOs with minimum three years of experience in working with SAFF. All have professional qualification of post-graduation in Social Work and they represent SAFF in different parts of India. All the RPOs working with SAFF in family development program of India were included in the study.

Procedures

A semi structured interview was conducted with all the forty participants and it was done based on a set of questions expanded from the major research interest areas, focusing on the family resilience strategies, coping mechanisms of the families and Social work approaches. The questions were open-ended and that allowed the participants to express their views freely and openly based on their practice experience. The follow up questions were improvised during the process.

Data Analysis

The researcher noted down all the points and coded the

information based on the research themes. Through repeated reviews of the in-depth interview data, the themes related to the study were identified and these are summarised in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

Five themes emerged from the data analysis in connection with the research questions. The findings of the study are indicative to; core strengths of Indian families, coping strategies of Indian families, how do social workers promote self-reliance in the family, what are the opportunities that make families resilient of fighting poverty and how the resilient families contribute to the community.

The following are the major findings of the study. Some of the responses of the participants are given as it is to emphasize their importance. The discussions are made based on the responses of the participants and the group discussion facilitated among the Social Workers working in Save a Family Plan.

Core Strengths of Indian Families

Interpersonal relationship and collective responsibility are the core strengths of Indian families. 'Physical proximity', the readiness of relatives to get involved and the families expectations that their relatives will involve themselves in supportive roles acts as powerful components in dealing with distresses. This results in individuals never feeling isolated but surrounded and supported by the family members during emergencies.

Family integrity, family loyalty and family unity' are also considered the most important strengths of Indian families and therefore Individuals compromise and accommodate for this. Family integrity and unity are important as it brings in security to the individual members. Each family provides an identity to the individuals and as a result individuals modify their behaviour in honour of this. Families also have the capacity to exert control over an individual's behaviour.

'Family value orientation and education is the key role of family itself' and it reverts back to the family in the form of individual commitment, dedication to the collective spirit of family system and contribution to take care of the weak in the family. The core values in Indian families are based on the religion, spirituality, and traditional mores, which have sustaining effect on the individuals' lives. 'Families always strive to protect the traditional values of family system and prepare the young ones to be fond of those systems, which they pass on to the next generations - this is a core strength of Indian family System'. Due to this factor the families still manage to influence the individuals. Social and moral values are introduced to the new generation by the families through natural processes. Another response from the participant highlights the gender roles in strengthening families. 'Traditional gender role clarification and endorsement somehow reduces the conflicts in the families' with women

in the families taking leading role in organizing and coordinating the members in most of the families. Educated and strengthened women in the families contribute to the overall resilience of families, as they play a pivotal role in upbringing children, educating other members, taking care of health and wealth of the family. The following response from the participant underlines the importance of family properties in dealing with needs. 'The concept of family asset is another strong point of families as the practice unifies all the financial activities of the family. The collective economic transactions improve the bargaining and purchasing capacities of the families'.

Coping Strategies of Indian Families

'Tolerance capacity of the families towards the diseases of individuals, financial crises and other issues along with traditional rituals are the foundation of coping in the families'. Social Workers in SAFP have noticed this tolerance capacity among the poor families in India. Poor families, to an extent, divert their attention from crises to the prospects of positive changes with the help of rituals and prayers. The Indian families can cope with the problems by seeing the spiritual aspect in it therefore growing, facing crises together, maintaining respect for individuals and keeping the line of communication open and between family members. It is true that spirituality helps families to come out of the trauma or crises (Anderson, 2010). During hardships individuals depend on spirituality and it provides them with lot of behavioural modifications and further strengthens their bond, which is integral part in facing the problems, unanimously. 'In poor families adaptation to problems are high and they consider problems as part of life and collectively fight against them, without considering them as unusual'. This perhaps enables the families to withstand during emergencies.

The availability of dear ones always helps the families to come out of the disorderliness of crises. It becomes the collective responsibility of the relatives and neighbours to re-arrange the families after crises or adversities. The main coping strategy of families is to share things between the members of the family and relatives to the best of their abilities. Many suggestions and supporting hands are mobilized by the family members. This interaction and interplay between the relatives enhance the coping of the families. Family is the first line of defence, especially for children and a major factor in their survival, health, education, development and protection. Family is a source of nurturance, emotional bonding and socialization. Family is a link between continuity and change. It has major potential to provide stability and support in problems or crises. Human development is enhanced by enriching family life and individuals depend on family without pre-judgments. Primarily families look within for resources to tackle their issues; for example, seeking help from the capable individual in the family.

As stated above, the helping process of the family starts

within the family and once it is capable of managing its individual needs. The families then expand their attention to the community. Collective planning, collaborative striving and sharing of resources among the members of the family and relatives are some of the effective coping strategies of the families. They work cohesively to solve problems faced by any members of the family. This was a natural function of the joint family system. - The traditional Indian family system, where in all the members, including extended members of a family live under a common roof, it works 'as magic' in keeping the members of the family tension free, relatively happy and contented even in today's competitive environment. Another response from a participant evidences All individuals keep a strong root to the family and this enables the families to avail of the public and community services for the family, which is directed by its individual member. Social Workers in SAFP provide individual based assistance also to get education to the individual members of the family and to secure a job to support the family.

Individual problems and diseases are very well managed within the families by ensuring proper support systems by the relatives, sharing of assets, and involving them in the familial and social activities. Family bears the cost of individual problems and accommodates them. Strong cultural adaptations, traditional value systems and practices still keep people together and prepare them ready for compromises.

'Family as a Unit of Strength' – Approaches of Social Workers

The following section will now address the concept of family as a unit of strength. 'Family is the powerful link that connects individuals with community and community to the individuals. Strengthening and maintaining that link can empower the community as well as the families in an equal pace. The community workers have opportunities to work through the 'neighbourhood groups and 'Grama Sabha meetings.'¹ Needs of the families become the targets of the communities and the communities find the leaders from the families to meet those targets. A mutual empowerment or strengthening happens in this process. Promoting maximum participation in such programs is one way of developing resilience to the families and guaranteeing inclusive community development practices by the Social Workers. Assistance is given to the families by ensuring their participation in the community programs.

Looking into the interpersonal relationship side, the response goes like; 'the strength of family revolves around the strong relationship between the husband and wife, especially in nuclear families'. Another response also worth noting; 'healthy relationship facilitates the spouses not only to perform their roles effectively but also help in the proper

socialization of the children'. The quality of interaction between husband and wife, parents and children and family with the neighbours and community is a sign of strength in the families which has repercussions on the whole family. Marital conflicts blemish all the sources of strength especially on the collective development. Enhancing individual resilience to cope with stress, adapt to the changes, life cycle education (preparing people to adapt to the changes at each level of their family life and changing roles) and financial planning in the families are the basic strategies adopted by the social workers to boost up interpersonal relations in the family. Family interaction with relatives improves when they are part of family functions and social gatherings. Promoting social gatherings and assuring the participation of family members in such programs are key to develop relationships. Frequent visit to relatives and their visits make the support system more elaborative and it brings in financial assistance to emergency relief services. Relatives are the strong source of coping mechanism and they are present in all the life-cycle events from birth to death. The nuclear family, of today, is strongly embedded in the extended kinship matrix which makes today's families able to cope with difficult situations and come forward with togetherness. Strong relationships encourage the families to join together for specific reasons and stand united in the pursuit of those objectives. The sharing of individual knowledge, wealth and health for the family is present in even in poorer families. Social Workers provide individual focused services that strengthen ties between members of the family in their intervention. The response of one of the respondents, 'bond between the members of the family is the most important source of strength and it makes them deeply committed to the family unit and to promoting the happiness and welfare of each other' displays the need of this to improve the cohesiveness in the family. Visiting the relatives and consultation with them are also viewed as helping strategies and Social Workers promote participation of people in social gatherings and family functions.

Roles played by parents in upbringing their children are another area of Social Work intervention. 'Children are the real assets of the family'. This thought is true when parents are able to discharge their parental duties with maximum perfection. Professional support to handle the behaviour issues of children, learning problems, relationship problems is necessary to the parents. Parental education, regular school meets and teacher- parent communication are instilled by the Social Workers.

Promoting Self-reliance and Strengthening

SAFP provides financial assistance to the families to assist them in the setting up of income generating activities. The practitioners who participated in the study opine that 'no provision of free finance or materials would make them

¹ This is a public administrative system that orchestrates people's participation.

self-reliant, but educating to equipping them to earn for themselves'. 'Having a permanent / sustainable source of earning is the stepping stone to self-reliance and there are many strategies to ensure this'. These strategies are in the forms of training or education, financial assistance to set up Income generating Programs (IGPs) like small scale industries, joint farming, lease land farming, cottage industries, etc. with the purpose of assisting individuals to avail themselves of community resources or services. Individualized interventions to change attitudes and increase confidence are also implemented and considered essential in strengthening resilience. Education, money management skills, capacity building training programs, instilling saving habits, confidence building programs, change and conflict management are the key approaches to ensure self-reliance in the families. Sharing the success stories of self-reliant families is a good way of motivating and promoting self-reliance in the families. Educational opportunities, alternative livelihood initiatives, credit and marketing facilities are also promoted for self-reliance.

Poverty can be fought only by strengthening the families and neighbourhoods. 'Individual families in the community are sustained by getting money and necessary materials borrowed from the neighbourhood during emergencies in rural India'. Getting families connected with local resources is another strategy adopted by Social Workers. The participants opine that; many poor families are being educated about the Governmental schemes. They are told that those provisions and schemes are their rights.

Schooling to children must be encouraged as part of strengthening the families. Dropout rates is one of the major issues in some of the rural areas hence they are encouraged to participate for the certificate courses provided by different agencies and NGOs with the support of the corporate and private entrepreneurs network. This brings in job opportunities to those who are unemployed and above the age of eighteen. 'We help them by searching in the family to locating and integrating those who are significant and capable in the helping processes. Some of the responsible members within the families are identified to monitor this and they take care of the necessary things in the family.

Life events and experiences of the family members are the real source of their coping and understanding those events and their responses would help the social workers to intervene with the families to identify their strengths. There are many significant others in the support system of family and that makes it important for the social workers to work with larger families.

Integrating the families properly with the norms of the community is one way of making the families resilient. This improves the acceptance of the family in the community and thereby they take up each and every opportunity to development. Identifying isolated families in the community and bringing them forward to participating in the community programs and sharing the community experience is another strategy of integrating the families with community. Getting membership in self-help groups and collaborating with

income generation activities in the community further strengthen the relationship of families with community.

How Resilient Families Contribute to the Community Empowerment

The SAFP professionals could identify many changes in the contribution of families to the communities after their intervention. They experienced the following changes in the families. When families are resilient to meet their needs and free of poverty and ignorance they reach out to productive resources that enable them to increase their income and obtain goods and services. They also participate in development processes and decisions that affect them. One of the responses from the participants underlines the empowerment visible in the families. It says; 'through family resilience the consumers become producers and engage in community building'. Resilient families take part in all social activities and they contribute to the community by becoming a facilitator, responsible stakeholder and producers of goods and services. Families gain confidence in participating in community decision making processes like 'Grama Sabha' and other agencies.

The attitudinal change of people and looking ahead to making a living in the community changes the overall outlook of the community. Resilience makes them contribute to the collective culture of the community. Social commitments improve and they contribute to the development of community. 'The knowledge, inspiration and motivation that resilient families share with the community are the major contribution as they bring empowerment to the families'. Income generation programs allow the families to provide opportunities to the community to buy, market and produce goods and services. Many leaders at the grass root level is the another prospect of strengthened families. The community responsibilities are successfully shared with its members. Families are capable of sharing necessary resources to the community development activities. When families are strengthened they come forward to fight against the social problems like, exploitation of women and children, abuse and human right violations in the community and can lead to the community initiating many social renovation programs. The 'safety net' in the community for women and children becomes stronger, through the resilient families. Resilient families are empowered families and they are sources of community resilience.

Conclusion

The authors have provided empirical evidence which states five elements to building/strengthening family resilience. Families have the innate capacities to withstand and rebound from the crises and contingencies. Global modernization has brought in many changes to the structure

and functions of the family and many of the roles have been taken over by other institutions but still family has the resilience to fuse its individuals together to provide individual as well as collective needs. 'Family resilience' is a dynamic area of research as it relates to both individual and community living. Resilient families are capable of reviving their strengths in kinship bonds, role fluidity, religious spiritual and ritual practices, provision of psycho-social security, exerting control over behavior and setting achievement orientation. Families are seen as the units of strength and Social Workers adopt the approaches ranging from assimilating the relationship between the members in the family to the larger community integration of the families. In the strengths based approach Social Workers successfully promote self-reliance, effective coping strategies, poverty amelioration and community building.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to peer reviewers and to Leisha Townson suggestions and improvements.

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