

The Development of Resilience of Social Work Services in a State of Political Conflict

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ABSTRACT: Throughout the world, political conflicts lead to violence between countries. In such situations, wars and terrorism result in physical and mental injury to members of the civilian population. The social work services are many times the first to provide assistance in the initial stages of shock and defense. The success of the services depends, among other things, on their organizational characteristics. The present study is based upon qualitative research conducted in Israel with social workers. The point of departure was the knowledge gained from the experience of the social workers. The sample included 46 interviewees from 20 social work services. Thirteen of the services were identified as having organizational resilience and coped effectively with emergencies among the civilian population exposed to war and terrorism, and the other 13 were found to lack resilience. The research findings indicated that the tendency to take action was the most prominent characteristic among the resilient organizations. Other characteristics that contributed to action (in resilient organizations) or deterred action (in unsuccessful organizations) were associated with organizational structure, management and leadership style, the decision-making process, communication, role division, relations with the environment, and nature of the roles of the team members. The study discusses the characteristics of resilience and practical aspects for the development of social work services.

KEYWORDS: Resilience, Disaster, War

Introduction

The primary aim of this study is to identify the characteristics of resilient organizations (social work services) as against those which break down, in order to enable managers and policy-makers to plan and implement suitable operational plans for the effective functioning of organizations in time of crisis.

The article describes a case study based on the experience of the social workers in periods of war and terror in Israel. In these periods, there was a direct threat to the life and property of individuals, and an extremely acute feeling of uncertainty and anxiety. The experience showed that not all the social work services reacted similarly: some of them broke down, while others showed resilience and succeeded in coping effectively with the state of emergency. This study attempts to identify the characteristics of resilience of organizations at the time of impact (when the blow fell) and of defensive action.

Method

The starting-point of this study is the knowledge, from their personal experience, of the social workers in the organizations which suffered direct damage: in other words, those who were on the spot when the rockets fell and or released to terror attacks, served as experts in creating the model of resiliency. The research is based on an inductive and qualitative approach, which encourages the workers to express their attitudes (Maxwell 2013; Patton 1990).

The Case: Location and Participants

The study was conducted as a case study in Welfare departments which supply social work services in the State of Israel, in spheres such as community work, the aged, rehabilitation, single-parent families and the handicapped.

52 respondents from 26 organizations took part in the survey. In order to distinguish between resilient and ineffective organizations, 20 regional inspectors were asked to supply a graded list of the 5 organizations in their sphere from the region which was attacked which, in their view, coped best in the stages of impact and defensive action. They were also asked which 5 organizations coped least effectively and/or broke down. The inspectors had visited the organizations during the attacks and obtained

a wide perspective on the organizations' work, capabilities and practices on the basis of direct professional relationships.

On the basis of this list, a list of 13 resilient organizations and the 13 least effective ones was drawn up. The chosen organizations (resilient and ineffective), were those which were most selected by the inspectors. Thus, the study uses a deliberate sample of salient poles of resilient vs. non-resilient organizations, rather than organizations on a continuum.

Two social worker from each organization was chosen at random and interviewed. Most of the workers in the organizations had a B.A. degree, and others had M.A. Most of them were women. Most of them had had previous experience of involvement in states of emergency.

Data Collection

The study was based on semi-structured interviews. Two researchers interviewed a similar number of participants. The participants were told to relate to the time of impact and defensive action. In order to bring to light organizational characteristics in crisis, the interviewers at first allowed the interviewees to speak freely about the issue, without referring to detailed questions (Patton 1990). Only at the next stage were the interviewees asked more specific questions:

Can you describe five outstanding characteristics of the organization in the course of the crisis? Are there any other characteristics? If the organization could speak, what would it say about its characteristics in the course of the crisis? If you could, what changes in the organization would you make during the crisis? And, similarly, with regard to other characteristics. What could have ensured that the organization would receive a grade of 100% during the crisis? What grade would you give the organization on this issue? Why? If you were conducting the interview, what would your next question be? Please reply.

Content Analysis

Each interview was recorded with a tape recorder, with the respondent's consent. The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Content analysis was executed by one interviewer and the authors. The data were read, and thereafter coded and classified into categories, each with its own characteristics and features. Then the data from each questionnaire were listed according to the categories. After this, a summary was made

for each group of respondents (resilient as against ineffective organizations). These lists facilitated a comparative analysis that revealed the differences between the groups. To ensure interviewer reliability, two main processes were employed. Firstly, each researcher (the authors and the interviewer) checked the data several times 'backwards and forwards', re-examining and verifying them as the analysis progressed, and thereby enhancing their definition of patterns. Secondly, to achieve dependability among researchers, each one separately analyzed, coded, and categorized the responses, and chose citations reflecting the overall content; only after that did they compare their results. It emerged that they were similar, indicating dependability of the processes and reliability of the patterns (Silverman 2013).

Findings and Discussion

One of the major findings of the study was that resilient organizations have a powerful propensity to action— initiative, a proactive or reactive approach, adaptation to the crisis situation, determination and perseverance in their actions despite difficulties, motivation, and a considerable investment of energy. This tendency is apparent over and above the normal tempo, in comparison with periods of normality. On the other hand, ineffective organizations were characterized by feelings of helplessness, and inaction or ineffectual action. The propensity to act is not surprising and accords well with research that indicates an inclination to act as a key component of organizational resilience, particularly as part of efforts of adaptation to the new situation brought about by the disaster (Lalonde 2007; Manyena 2006). However, in addition to highlighting the relative importance of this component as the key to resilience, the findings show that other organizational characteristics of resilient organizations also facilitate and encourage the inclination to act, whereas ineffective organizations impede any inclination to act, and display characteristics contrary to these as we shall see below:

Ad-hoc decisions and their immediate application. A crisis situation involves many decisions, but does not allow for long gradual decision-making processes. Ad-hoc decisions and their immediate application make more efficient intervention possible, whereas hesitancy and abstinence from decision-making make clearly directed activity impossible.

Authoritative and task-orientated leadership. In a time of crisis, the worker needs direction and clear guidelines. A limited level of mutual consultation is necessary,

but an excess of participation demands resources of time and energy which in time of crisis should be devoted to tasks requiring direct involvement.

Moreover, a manager who sets a personal example strengthens the feeling of solidarity, and thereby motivates the workers to perform their tasks despite the dangers involved.

Integration, coordination, and work in small teams greatly facilitate the timely exchange of information, flexibility, cooperation and mutual support, all of which are needed in a crisis situation in order to adapt patterns of work quickly, whereas complexity, hierarchy, and division into sub-units necessitates a great deal of mutual activity at many intersections, creates a need for negotiation and a proliferation of arguments, and is liable to slow down activity, particularly when time is limited.

Simplicity and uniformity of assignments make it possible to supply the service appropriate to the basic needs of the population in time of crisis, and to carry out the assignment speedily, whereas continued concentration on exclusive long-term professional activities does not meet the changing needs of the citizens and does not give the quick responses needed in the stress of the period of impact and defensive action.

Feelings of distributive justice regarding resources, burdens and rewards. In places where there are feelings of injustice rather than of fairness, the workers are liable to compensate themselves by reducing the level of their activity.

Complementary strategy or coalition involving cooperation with the surroundings facilitates the pooling of resources required in time of crisis, whereas a strategy of competition or obstruction hampers the pooling of resources and prevents the efficient use of neighboring resources, particularly when supplementary resources not available to the organization are needed.

Trustworthy communication in real time, with the aid of multi-dimensional channels facilitates the direct flow of information to all the workers at the appropriate time to ensure swift action. The flow of information through a single channel, by contrast, prolongs the time required for the information to reach all the workers, and may impair the trustworthiness of the information as it passes from one unit to another.

It may be asked whether the resilient organizations changed their characteristics in comparison with times of normality, and if so how much. Although this issue was not investigated systematically in this study, its findings point clearly to a number of changes and initiatives which resilient organizations need to carry out.

Firstly, most of the workers abandon their previous patterns of activity and carry out a number of simple and uniform tasks.

Secondly, both managers and workers abandon incremental and long-term decision-making processes involving breaks between the different stages. The new process is characterized by simultaneity and a smooth flow from decision to execution. In addition, decision-making processes are now accompanied by internal assessment and guidance, rather than external evaluation and control. The process is free of political considerations, and is based, in the main, on rational deliberation.

Thirdly, resilient organizations more readily adopt procedures marked by distributive justice – the creation of clear practices with regard to the distribution of the burden between the workers and the allocation of rewards.

Most important - there emerges a model of resilient organizations whose organizational characteristics encourage action, as against a model of ineffective organizations whose organizational characteristics curb action.

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