

# Rethinking 'strengths' and 'resilience' in youth health

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Plate 7: *Lost in Colour*. Star, September, 2023.

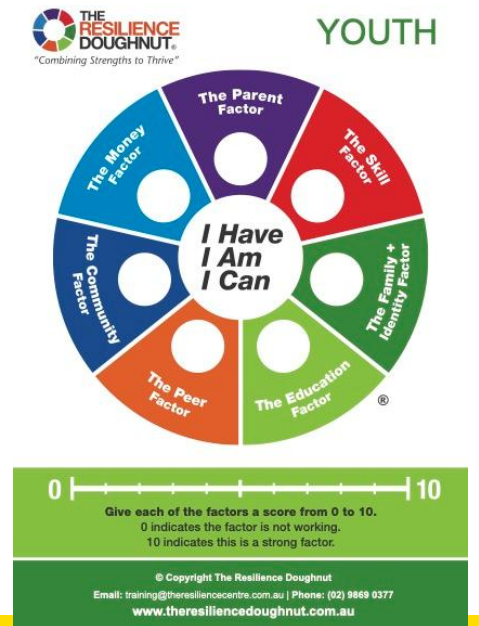
# What are strengths-based approaches?

- “dramatic departure” (Gray 2018)
- assets, resilience, and empowerment to identify the resources to minimize problems
- safe, collaborative and empowering ways of working with youth



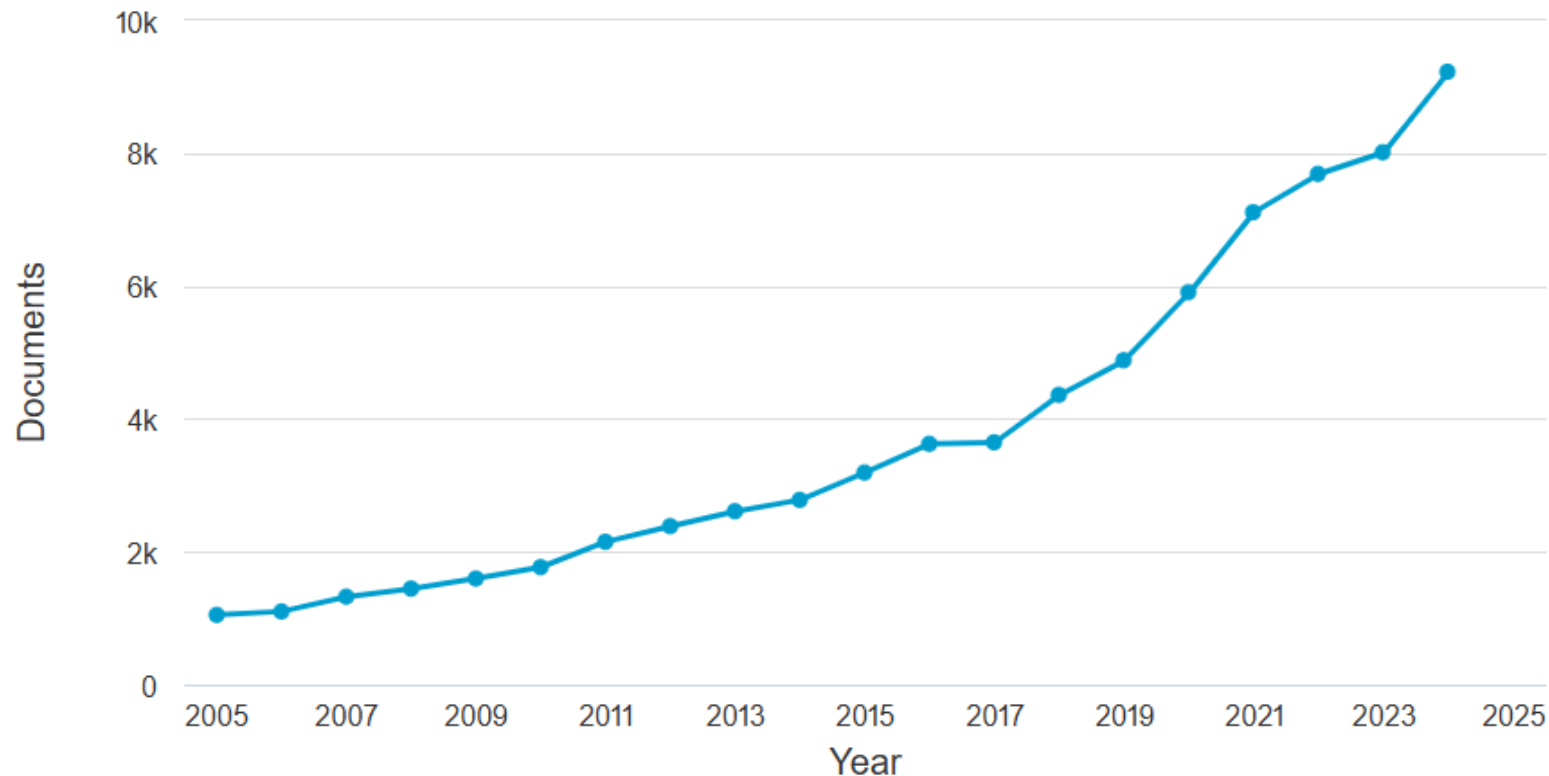
SIMPLE SWITCHES FOR Strength-Based Phrases		
INSTEAD OF...		
WON'T FOLLOW DIRECTIONS	TRY	SELF DIRECTED
CAN'T MAKE FRIENDS	TRY	PREFER INDEPENDENT PLAY
STRUGGLES WITH TRANSITIONS	TRY	BENEFITS FROM TRANSITION SUPPORTS
HERE ARE THEIR DEFICITS...	TRY	HERE ARE THEIR STRENGTHS...
THEY ARE OBSESSIVE	TRY	SPECIAL INTERESTS INCLUDE...

@The.Well.Balanced.OT



# A rapid proliferation...

Documents by year



- Scopus
- 2005-2025
- health, medicine, psychology, social science
- title only!

**n= 75,874**

# Research questions:

In the research literature...

- How are young people's 'strengths' conceptualised?
- How their 'strengths' are thought to develop or be created their lives?
- What assumptions or logics underpin these understandings?

# Method:

- Scoping review
- n=71 papers, 2018-2023
- Marginalised young people
- Extraction of text
- Iterative thematic analysis to identify assumptions and logics

# Main approaches

Broadly characterised: “positive adaptation within the context of adversity”  
(Alessi et al., 2020:11240)

Main language and concepts:

1. Resilience (n=19)
2. Protective factors (n=13)
3. Resilience and protective factors (n= 12)
4. Social capital (n=16)



Plate 41 Mesmerized. Micah, October, 2022.

# Resilience approaches (n=19)

- ***Internal traits:*** cognitive qualities
  - self-esteem and self-efficacy (Alvarez et al., 2020)
  - 'appropriate choices' (Greeno et al., 2018: 176)
  - 'positive self-identity' 'social competency' (Kessler et al., 2018)
- ***External traits:*** immediate interpersonal relationships
  - parenting style and 'connectedness to parents' (Kessler et al., 2018)
  - 'family cohesion' (Alvarez et al., 2022)

Articulated as scales and indices eg, *CD-RISC Connor Davidson Resilience Scale*

# Protective factors approaches (n=13)

## *Individual level factors:*

- 'self-control and personality' (Craig et al 2021)
- 'coping styles', and 'personality traits' (Kahn Ungar, 2023)

## *Environmental level factors:*

- 'parental monitoring' (Tyler and Ray, 2019)
- 'father involvement' (Yoon et al., 2021)
- 'access to mental-health care' (Greenfield et al 2020)

Articulated as presence/absence, proximal/distal, accumulation, additiveness



Interchangeable use of the language of 'resilience' and 'protective factors' (n=12)

# The ‘Found Subject’

- Similar division of internal/external
- Environment narrowly defined in terms of interpersonal family features
- Object of focus is *the individual*; environments separate and contextual

“Found subject” = the classic epistemological position of resilience as found within individuals as pre-existing and naturally-occurring (Aranda et al 2012)



# Classify, measure and associate... but cannot explain

Weak at explaining *how* resilience or strengths develops in young people's lives:

- levels, domains, scores, scales, indexes
- statistical practices of association (correlation, regression, odds ratios)
- do not describe social processes, simply establish relationships



Plate 15: *Nobody*. Edgar, June, 2023.

# Social capital approaches (n=16)

## ‘Strengths’ in the types and quality of interpersonal relationships

- “collective resources available through durable social connections” (Mullan, 2022)
- Types of social connections: family, foster carers, teachers, after-school care staff
- Quality and durability of social connection: bonding and bridging capital

## Relationships are *consequential* or *generative*:

- *Philp and Gil, 2020*: relationships with after-school program staff who cajole and encourage could generate positive expectations about higher education and in consequence enrolments at university

# Better explanatory power... Social relations

Object of focus is *a social relation*:

- interpersonal relationships
- Possession of goods and opportunities within these
- Knowledges, values and collective identities



Plate 22: *Don't Worry Pretty Baby*. Lauren, June, 2023.

## Logics of individualism

(‘strengths’ found within individuals and immediate environments)

*Individualising logics can...*

- Cast young people as not ‘resilient-enough’
- Perpetuate approaches that focus on changing individual behaviours and choices
- Hides other ways of understanding ‘strengths-based’ approaches

## Logics of relationalities

(‘strengths’ found in relationships, goods and opportunities)

*Relational logics can..*

- Shift focus to changing relationships, goods and opportunities within networks

# Concluding thoughts...

- Strengths-based and resilience-building approaches are powerful but conceptually weak.
- Without careful conceptualisation and implementation, they risk reproducing deficit models.
- Shift from *measuring attributes* to *understanding processes*
- What can we learn from Indigenous models of engagement and care?



Plate 17: Untitled. Carrot, October, 2021.

Watego, C., et al., 2021. Black to the Future: Making the Case for Indigenist Health Humanities. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public. Health 18

Kana'iaupuni, S. M. (2005). Ka'akālai Kū Kanaka: A call for strengths-based approaches from a Native Hawaiian perspective. Educational Researcher, 34(5), 32-38.

Gardner K, et al. 'Our culture makes us strong': Understanding and working with community strengths among Aboriginal people in western Sydney. Health Promot J Austral. 2024.





**THANK  
YOU!**

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