

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



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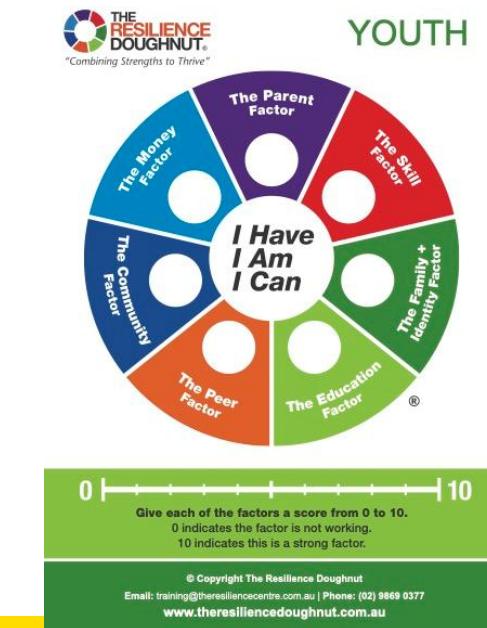
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Plate 7: Lost in Colour. Star, September, 2023.

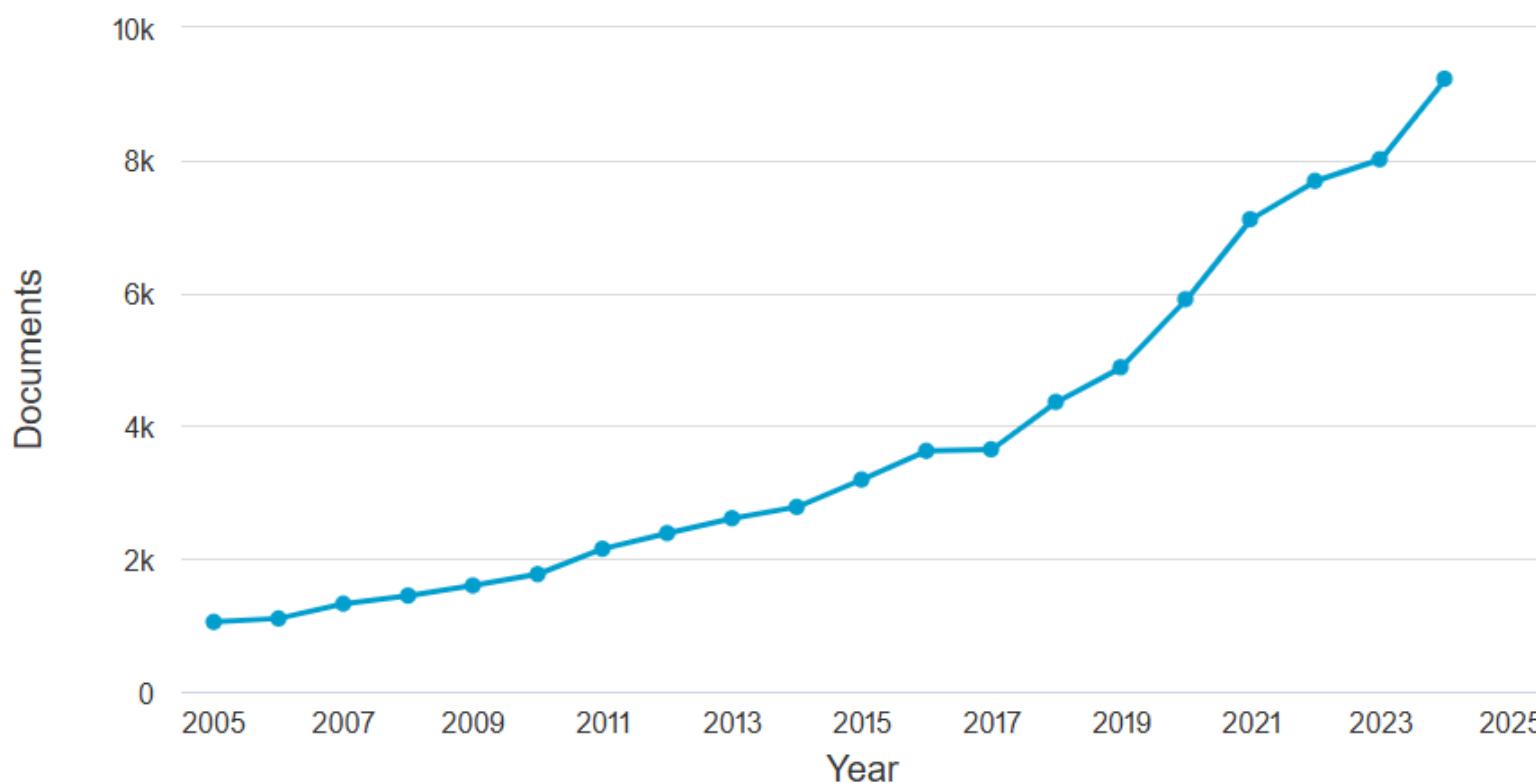
# What are strengths-based approaches?

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



# 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)

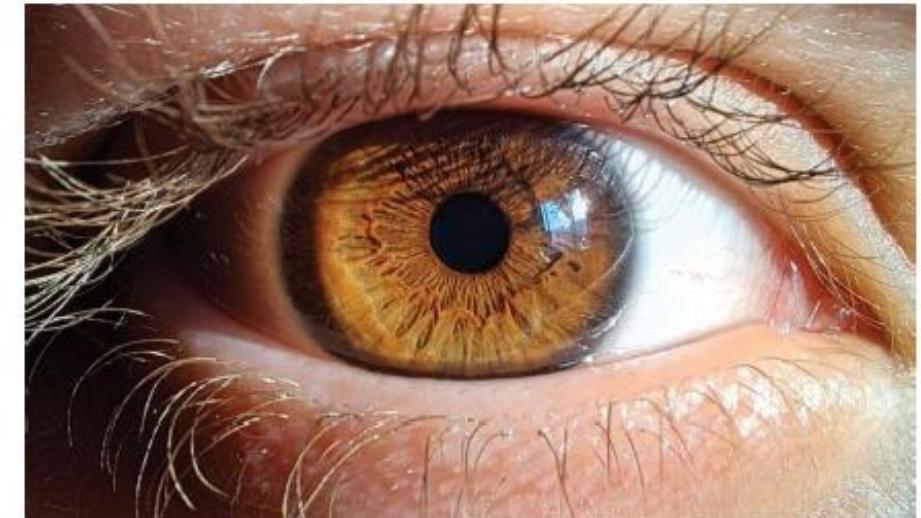


Plate 41 Mesmerized. Micah, October, 2022.



# 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)



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# 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.



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# 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)

## Logics of relationalities

('strengths' found in relationships, goods and opportunities)

*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

*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.



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THANK  
YOU!

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