

Resilience: The Zoom Lens Factor

Michael Griffin

This paper uses the metaphor of a zoom lens on a camera to explore notions of resilience. The narrative tracks the journey of a thirteen-year-old boy in therapy as he learns to disengage from escalating family conflict and to attain a broader, more optimistic outlook on life. Although the paper is in the form of a story, it springs from a cognitive-behavioural model of therapy and only descends to photographic metaphors with reluctance. The view of resilience which emerges is in the tradition of Seligman's learned optimism and Meichenbaum's stress inoculation approach. Along the way, though, intrusions arise from attachment theory, temperament research, a plethora of psychotherapies and, of course, the zoom lens factor. If finding a new perspective is important, life really is a camera. Most of all, this is one boy's story of a long and often difficult journey. The therapist is responsible for all the extra baggage.

Part 1: On the Banks of the Glenelg

At the Victoria/South Australia border, near the small town of Nelson, the Glenelg river turns south for its final run to the sea. Along its eastern banks, the track for the Great South West Walk links with a forest road to form a 20km circuit fit for secretive joggers like me. I am advanced enough to be able to think and run at the same time, so my Saturday morning exercise provides ample opportunity for me to reflect on life and work. My story on resilience owes its origins to just such a run on the banks of the Glenelg.

I was thinking about one of my young clients, a boy I will call Jamie for the purpose of this story. Jamie is thirteen years old and lives with his single mother and younger brother, who can be very demanding. Mum is a victim of family violence and abuse as a child and probably still suffers from the legacy of untreated PTSD. Jamie has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and has a history of locking horns with his mother in a coercive escalation of anger, aggression and violence. At primary school, Jamie was drawn like a moth to a flame by any schoolyard rumble and was constantly in trouble for fighting and aggravation. Jamie was not an easy boy to engage when he was referred to CAMHS for anger management, being almost incapable of sitting and talking for longer than ten minutes, often rescheduling appointments at the last moment, and losing track of any

therapeutic thread because of frequent family crises. Upheavals at home led to Jamie running away and being placed in respite care on several occasions.

When I think of Jamie now, after two years and about 25 sessions, I picture a decidedly resilient boy who has found a way to disengage from escalation traps and who is beginning to teach other students at school how to do the same. Somewhere along the way, Jamie discovered the zoom lens factor.

Jamie knows that his mother will probably never change her ways. She will always be subject to sudden shifts of mood from apparent calm to screaming frenzy. Once roused, she will go on the offensive and berate Jamie for even trivial offences. The younger brother is somewhat disabled and is spared most of these tirades. Yet all three have learnt to counter attack and to push on for victory, whatever the cost. There is, of course, no doubting their love for one another.

I encouraged Jamie to play detective, to see whether he could figure out why he and mum got stuck into each other so frequently, and to experiment with ways of stopping the escalation train in its tracks. I taught him relaxation exercises, self-talk strategies, the art of experimentation, and ways of searching for clues. Jamie brought to our sessions a mix of boundless energy, a conviction that he could find a better way to live his life, and a remarkable ability to take in what I was saying during a ten minute session, while simultaneously bouncing off the walls and preparing to leave. One of our recent sessions lasted for about 35 minutes, and Jamie could scarcely believe this was possible. The zoom lens factor was beginning to slow him down to a comfortable jog.

Over the course of many set-tos with mum, Jamie gradually found a way to disengage. He has refined his approach during the last year or so, learning to give his mother a clear message that they need a breather, walking quietly to his room, closing the door softly behind him and putting on earphones to listen to music. When sufficient time has passed for mum's storm to subside, Jamie emerges from his room and goes about his business. Sometimes, the



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pause has allowed him to reflect on his mother's original request or complaint and so to be more helpful than was possible when battle loomed.

Jamie's ability to disengage and to reflect has come from his discovery that the ring in which he and mum fought was a very small ring in the vast scheme of things and that there were ways to exit the ring without appearing to lose the battle. Indeed, Jamie began to see that the battle was not important if he could find a way to manoeuvre around it and continue on his journey through life without its emotional baggage and physical scars. Jamie is old enough now to find some pride in his appearance and demeanour, and battle scars can detract from youthful beauty.

Part 2: The Zoom Lens

Jamie and I have never talked about the zoom lens factor because I did not fully discover it until I ran on the banks of the Glenelg one sunny Saturday morning at the tail end of February. Pondering Jamie's journey, I played around with the concept of perspective change. Once, when I was researching the field of paradoxical psychotherapy, I knew it as 'decontextualisation'. In family therapy, I would talk about a new connotation (hopefully a positive one) or I would try to relabel or reframe what my client was saying. In narrative therapy, perhaps, I would seek to help my clients 're-story' their experiences. If life were a camera, I would simply manipulate the zoom lens, just as Jamie has learned to do.

For Jamie's mother, life seems to be lived with the zoom lens fully extended. Her view of the world is always up close and personal, and the lens exaggerates the detail so that the small pimples of life appear as moon craters. Jamie's mother has lost the ability to retract the lens and so gain a fresh perspective, restoring the threatening view of the moon crater to its safer presence as a mere pimple. Jamie, on the other hand, can now vary the position of his

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zoom lens, retracting it for a while when the vivid detail up close threatens to overwhelm, then extending the lens again after a period of reflection from a distance.

The fluid use of one's personal zoom lens appears to be a (mentally) healthy way to operate. Jamie's mother suffers from hyper-extension of her lens, so that detail, colour and movement overwhelm her and she feels continually threatened and in crisis. Jamie might have made the opposite mistake, of keeping his lens permanently retracted in order to survive, had it not been for his lively temperament, which led him to crave excitement and detail over passivity and distance. He had to learn how to accommodate to his need for being in the action and his opposing need to find some peace and space. His lens needed to be well oiled for

finely regulated movement back and forth along its full range as the changing forces of life demanded.

Some people cope with an overwhelming life by withdrawing the lens so far that the view becomes a trivial speck which they can disengage from and ignore. Maybe some forms of dissociation and psychosis have a zoom lens factor. I can remember some other young clients who responded to trauma and abuse in their lives by retracting the lens until other people and the world around them were unimportant. They viewed existence from a great height, so that people were just like ants on the forest floor, of passing scientific interest but otherwise best ignored.

Part 3: The Forest Floor

Zoom lenses can be attached to cameras on tripods, aimed at one spot. Imagine the forest floor along the banks of the Glenelg, with a camera and its macro lens focused down on one small patch of earth. There is nothing happening, and the fully extended lens sees only grains of sand and blades of grass. Perhaps a solitary insect moves through the field of view but soon all is quiet again as the world slowly turns and the nearby waters gently flow. All of a sudden, the boredom is shattered by a seething army of ants scurrying past the lens. Moments of intense colour and movement, agonising detail of an army ready for battle. The film is almost overwhelmed with detail, until the army has passed and only sand and grass remain, unmoving and timeless.

If the camera could be detached from the tripod, then the lens, still up close and personal, could follow the journey of the ant army. Life would remain dramatic with colour and movement, as ants en masse find their way through an ever-changing forest floor. From the perspective of an extended zoom lens, life would be chaotic, swarming and confronting, but never boring. Follow the drama by moving the camera or, if a tripod is used, settle for long periods of boredom broken by moments of crisis. Jamie, I am sure, would see his mother's world as a zoom lens on a tripod for much of the time, but with mood swings allowing the camera to follow the drama and the film to become full of detail. Boredom shifts to moments of anger, then suddenly a surge of escalating rage leading to crisis and temporary exhaustion. The pattern repeats, and Jamie has to learn how to deal with it.

Jamie's own camera sometimes gets stuck on its tripod. The zoom lens still works well but the variation of detail does not sufficiently alter the picture for Jamie to handle his life and family with confidence. He can disengage and go to his room, but his thoughts remain focused on this small space he calls family life. He doesn't want to retract to infinity, where his house and family are just specks to ignore. Jamie is beginning to learn how to use the zoom lens on a moveable camera, so that he can plan beyond this day and this space. He is opting to move in a larger world, so his choices go beyond a retracted lens (still rooted to the one spot) or a daily life of escalation and chaos (following

the ant army) or of boredom and restlessness (an extended lens on the tripod). Jamie is learning to move the camera and the lens in some measure of synchrony. Is this what we know as resilience?

Part 4: The Nature of Resilience

When I think of my contacts with Jamie over the last two years, I see a boy who has moved from being in the ring with anger and aggression to disengaging from conflict and assisting others to do the same. He isn't always successful, of course, being tempted still to follow the ants into battle but, often enough now, Jamie will take a different perspective and stay out of the ring. He can weather the storms in his family much better now, he can get a realistic fix on his mother and her behaviour, he can stay out of major wars with his brother (who can be violent), he has settled remarkably well at school, he is positive about his own attributes, and he can begin to envisage a life beyond the constraints of his family and upbringing. At the same time, Jamie can acknowledge his love for family members, warts and all. He is beginning to value learning and to stay focused when it is appropriate to do so. Like many children with an ADHD style, Jamie can often take in information while appearing to be hopelessly distracted, so therapy has been useful even though the therapist was sorely tempted at times to despair. Fortunately, both the therapist and Jamie have acquired what Martin Seligman would call learned optimism.

At the time of typing out these thoughts, fresh from my run through the forest on the banks of the Glenelg, I was in the middle of preparing a little article called 'Attachment, Resilience and Temperament: the ART of Development'. I had been pondering the works of attachment theorists such as Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main, and the rebuttal by temperament researchers such as Stella Chess. A secure attachment in infancy and a relatively 'easy' temperament seemed to link in well with notions of the resilient child, someone able to bounce back from adversity and to problem solve despite the vicissitudes of life. Resilience appeared to be enhanced through such cognitive-behavioural approaches as stress inoculation and it had a lot in common with learned optimism. All of these approaches

involve perspective change and, I suspect, the ability at appropriate moments to disengage and re-emerge with a new plan and renewed hope. For people like Jamie, whose early years did not yield such an optimal combination, the

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quest becomes one of building in resilience later on. Since the Glenelg run, I think of it as the zoom lens factor, perhaps aided by the tripod variable.

Keen photographers would by now be asking about the appropriate use of filters, both coloured and polarising, but I am not about to outreach myself to that extent. Suffice to say that resilience may be linked to whether one tends to see the world through rose-coloured glasses, in black and white, through anti-glare tinting, or through a glass darkly. It is an attractive but complex concept. My young client Jamie has figured out some of it, at least, and he doesn't even own a camera. For that metaphor, I am totally to blame.

I will continue my Saturday morning runs on the banks of the Glenelg, and Jamie and I will be seeing each other for a while yet. The getting of resilience does not guarantee a life free of upset, and it doesn't guarantee perfect problem solving every time. As in the case of Jamie, though, it can provide a hopeful journey towards better self-knowledge and understanding of others, and clues for how to ride the bumpy roller-coaster of life with determination and style. Just keep the zoom lens well oiled, Jamie!

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‘Small wonder, then, that she'd so wanted to believe that it was possible to do it right. To raise a child in what Miss Minto always rather simperingly called “the crucible of attachment”.’

(Miss Minto is a member of social worker Bridie's work team in Anne Fine's *Telling Liddy: A Sour Comedy*,

London, Bantam, 1998. The quotation comes from p. 95.) We always hope that our readers are 'attached' to reading the ANZJFT!

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