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INTRODUCTION TO RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL WORK

Social work is carried out within a network of human relationships. Indeed, it is human relationships and the many types of problems associated with them that are usually at the root of social workers' professional tasks. And it is this relational dimension in social work practice which often draws students into making it their career – fulfilling their wish to 'work with people'.

This book is an attempt to consider in depth the place of relationships in social work practice and to explore ways in which workers can use relationships to promote creative outcomes in their encounters with clients. As you work through the book you will see why using relationships requires social workers to *use themselves*, and why using the self, in the sense meant here, requires an enhanced knowledge of the self that is being used. So, *self-awareness* in the social worker is a major theme that you will find recurring throughout the chapters.

But first it is essential to understand that social workers' relationships with their clients are not neutral and free-floating. Rather, they are to a greater or lesser extent tied down, influenced and shaped by wider socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. There is no one-to-one relationship between a social worker and a client that is not impacted upon by macro-frameworks such as legislation, or protocol, or departmental budgets. Equally, any specific worker–client relationship will take place within a cultural context that holds particular attitudes towards fundamental dimensions of life such as sexual relationships, child-rearing practices, roles associated with gender, lesbianism and homosexuality, marriage and divorce, and so on.

To these influences on the worker–client relationship must be added the fact that individual social workers are employed by agencies that have specific tasks which will influence any relational interaction a worker has with a client. Thus, the term 'social worker' is multifarious, describing a heterogeneous group of individuals who are employed in settings that may range from statutory work with children to local voluntary agencies with a focus on homelessness or hospice care. And within this diversity of social work roles can be found jobs that are mainly desk-based, working with computerised data, and other work where frequent face-to-face contact with clients is normal and essential to the agency's function. Thus, to begin to understand

a specific worker's relationship with a specific client, one would need to know about the macro-structures under which the agency operates, the cultural contexts of the client, the agency's defined tasks and the methods it uses to complete them.

Contextualising worker–client relations is important to understanding them and in the book there are case examples for you to consider in terms of the influences which impinge on the relationship. But in normal circumstances the greatest influence on relationships is workers themselves. It is their *self* which they bring to their relationships and which forms the client's most direct experience of the humanity of social work. The self of the social worker is the 'face' of their agency, and it can be the face that is associated with laws, powers and procedures. Thus the social worker's self is a visible sign and experience for the client of other, less tangible things. It is therefore not surprising that a worker's self and how they use it to relate to their clients can have a huge impact on how the client feels and how they act and react. This is why one important focus in this book is *you*, and how you can learn to develop and use your self creatively and consciously in your professional practice.

In order to help you to develop the skills of using your self the book will provide you with knowledge about the importance of relationships to human well-being, and help you to learn and practise ways of relating that are deeper and more therapeutic. The chapters focus on two basic questions which are the *why* and the *how* of relating. The first question about *why* requires dipping into the theory of relationships and drawing upon the disciplines of psychology, sociology and neuroscience. Each of these in its own way points to the critical impact that relationships have upon the mental, social and physical health of people. And the second question, *how*, is one about techniques and practice skills. Throughout the chapters you will find case studies and exercises that will help you to answer these questions of *why* and *how* and, if you work your way through these on your own and with others, you should make progress towards becoming more confident and competent to use your self as a resource in your professional role.

Though the case studies in the book concern individuals in unique circumstances, and the self-awareness exercises focus upon your individuality, much of the theoretical basis of the book will, by necessity, deal with those dimensions of human experience that are more universal – qualities that remain more or less the same wherever and whenever they are found. And so, as you reflect on your own unique life, you should be able to locate your uniqueness within the more general relational needs and experiences of humankind.

Likewise, the book sets examples of specific worker–client relationships within what appear to be general relational needs. And while frequent reference is made to the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for social work, the standards that are highlighted are those which tend to express relatively constant social work skills and values with regard to worker–client relationships. In doing this, no attempt is being made to deny the relativity of human experience or the changes which it undergoes. Nor is it trying to assert human absolutes by disregarding cultural variation. Rather, it is following in the tradition of humanistic psychology pioneered by Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1980).

Maslow (1968: 3), writing of human need, argues that ‘We have, each of us, an essential biologically based inner nature, which is to some degree “natural”, intrinsic, given, and in a certain limited sense, unchangeable, or, at least, unchanging’. Here, the claim is that human ‘nature’, with its needs for safety and security, for belonging, for loving and being loved, for feeling trusted and trusting, has a universal quality that transcends the specificity of any one time, ethnicity or culture.

In like vein, Carl Rogers based his whole professional life on the claim that if we relate to others in ways that are warm, genuine and empathic, then we activate the other person’s ‘actualising tendency’, engaging with them in what he describes as ‘an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfilment of...inherent possibilities’ (1980: 117) in the person. For him, this actualising tendency was at the core of the individual person and was *inherent* – a universal given in the human condition that would thrive if it met relationships that facilitated it, or wither away if it experienced neglect, indifference or abuse. In Rogers the idea is again expressed that the *essence* of humanity is universal, though the form it takes will be influenced by cultural mores, customs, and so on.

This book is written in that humanistic spirit. Though its focus is on social work, what it expresses about human relationships and their capacity to promote, diminish, or even destroy well-being, extends far beyond social work practice. When, as a social worker, you respond with love towards a specific individual you are also responding at the same time to a general need in humanity. In this sense relational social work is part of a much larger picture about human relationships and the qualities within them that can sometimes help others to feel more safe, more trusting and thriving.

ANTI-OPPRESSION, ANTI-DISCRIMINATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

As you read the book you will find relatively few *explicit* references to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, or to principles such as equality, worth, human rights and dignity (though there are references to other sources where these crucial concerns for social work theory and practice are discussed). The reason for this is that, though these principles and attitudes are enshrined in law and protocol, they can, in the final analysis, only ever be expressed meaningfully in human relationships. In other words, it is *only* relationships that can move them beyond being an idea in print and turn them into an experienced reality. The ideas and the practical exercises in the book, when followed, will lead to worker–client relationships that are respectful of culture, age, gender, sexuality – and the many other dimensions of human life in relation to which the social work profession has pioneered tolerance, anti-discrimination and anti-oppression. Thus, while anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices are not explicit, they are enmeshed with most of what is written in this book.

CLIENTS' VIEWS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

The book is written in the belief that many clients want their social workers to relate to them in ways that go beyond a technique-based engagement, however competent that might be in achieving an outcome. For example, research (GSCC 2008) among social workers' clients reveals that

People using services highlight the importance of the relationship they have with a social worker as key to the positives they associate with social work practice. It is this relationship which is the starting point for building trust and supporting people's self-empowerment. People refer to the strengths of the informality, flexibility and warmth of this relationship.

The qualitative aspects of the relationship that are identified here will be discussed in the chapters that follow. Similar expressions of a need for relationship follow throughout the client groups. For example, quoting from *About Social Workers: A Children's Views Report* the GSCC (2008) writes that

Social workers need to understand more from a child's perspective about any situation ... [they need] understanding of a person's feelings and to understand all children are different ... With children in care, they need to always know they have someone they can turn to and talk to ... You just want people to listen, understand and be there on a regular basis.

It should go without saying that children in care have usually had prior experience of inconstancy in their relationships, and their relational development will only be enhanced by continuity and consistency from those responsible for looking after them. Social workers cannot provide this unless they are available for the longer term, unless they listen and engage, and try to build trust in children who, for well-understood reasons, are distrustful.

Similarly, clients of the mental health services seek relationship based practice from their social workers. Here (Department of Health 2008) is the argument in relation to the Care Programme Approach:

Services should be organised and delivered in ways that promote and co-ordinate helpful and purposeful mental health practice based on fulfilling therapeutic relationships and partnerships between the people involved. These relationships involve shared listening, communicating, understanding, clarification, and organisation of diverse opinion to deliver valued, appropriate, equitable and co-ordinated care. The quality of the relationship between service user and the care co-ordinator is one of the most important determinants of success.

Again, emphasis is placed on qualities such as listening and communicating, and such qualities only arise within the context of a relationship. And deep listening, and communication that goes beyond the superficial, will usually be present only where trust has developed through time and by constancy.

The level of client–worker engagement that is being described here goes not only to the depths of the client, but of the social worker also. That is, relational social work is both *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal*. No social worker can listen in depth to their client and not engage themselves as a person, albeit a professional person. A social work student described this kind of relationship by saying that ‘part of yourself is part of the practice’, and her words encapsulate the personal involvement that relational social work requires of the worker. Who social workers are cannot meaningfully be separated from what they do, and this way of practising, its depths and its boundaries, will be important aspects of the book.

THE SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE

This emphasis on the personhood of the social worker is increasingly to be found in formal documents that set out directions for the future of social work. For example, the report from the Social Work Task Force (2009) argues that the process of selecting who will become a social work student should include ‘opportunities to reflect on life experience’, so that what is *intrapersonal* is explicitly seen as having an effect of what is *interpersonal*. Students, the report argues, must have the ‘right mix of intellectual and personal qualities’ and, accordingly, this book will provide you with opportunities to assess and develop your personal qualities in ways that are consistent with social work theory, values and practice. The Social Work Task Force also stresses the importance of allowing adequate time for case analysis and supervision, seeing these as making possible ‘the fine judgements at the heart of successful social work’. Again, this book will discuss these dimensions of social work practice and provide you with opportunities to relate them to yourself.

SOME NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout the book you will find a mixture of feminine and masculine pronouns used to describe social workers and their clients. Sometimes the gender matters. For example, one case study discusses the psychological impact on a social worker who hears she is to have a hysterectomy. At other times the gender is less important, or irrelevant – thus making it possible for the reader to substitute ‘he’ for ‘she’, or vice versa, without making any difference to the point under discussion.

A further question about terminology revolves round the use of ‘client’ or ‘service user’, or (as in some local authorities) ‘customer’. My feeling about ‘customer’ is that it is language which derives from economically based market relations and, as such, is alien to the founding principles of the welfare state and social work – that is, the provision of a service which is universally available, and never based on the ability to ‘buy’ – a condition that the word ‘customer’ implies. But what of ‘client’ or ‘service user’?

There is an element of subjective judgement at work here. Two social work authors (Thompson and Thompson 2008: xxiv) state it like this:

There is no ideal term, but my preference is for 'client' as it is a term I associate with professionalism and a commitment to treating people with respect, rather than 'service user' which has connotations of a service-led mentality.

A similar sentiment, but giving additional reasons for the choice, may be found in a Community Care (2008) online discussion:

Personally, I see the term 'service user' as mildly derogative. Maybe it's the word 'user', which has mostly negative connotations. I much prefer the term 'client', which I feel offers a certain amount of dignity to the person involved with the service. Connotations associated with this word are those of the person having some degree of choice and of working in partnership with the service.

It is possible to find protagonists to support either side of this debate. With reference to this book the word 'client' is used more often, although the term service user is adopted when illustrating the argument (in Chapter 7) that the social services worker is someone who is appointed to be in the *service* of their client. As with the use of 'he' or 'she', there is no reason why a reader, if they wish, should not mentally substitute 'service user' for 'client' as they read.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into eight chapters, some focusing on theory about relationships and others more on practice. In several chapters there are exercises that will help you to apply the theory or the practice to yourself and it is this emphasis on the *personal application* of ideas which lies at the heart of the book's teaching. And so, from the outset, you are encouraged to use the book for intellectual and cognitive learning but also for emotional and personal development. What is meant here will become clearer as you begin to work your way through the chapters but, in this introduction, it is important to emphasise this dual nature of the text. It is about social work theory and practice, but it is also about *you* and your development as a student social worker in relationship with yourself and with others.

Chapter 2 argues that relationships are of central importance to social work because they are of central importance to humanity. Any claim by social work that it is a human discipline must imply that human relating lies at its heart, and forms of doing social work that distance workers from their relationships with clients are distancing social work from its humanistic foundations. The chapter will discuss the importance of developing skills in relating not only to others but also to oneself. Thus, an ongoing theme of the book is introduced – that relationship based practice is both *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal*.

Chapter 3 enters more deeply into the theoretical bases of relationship based social work. Here you will see the crucial part played by relationships in the bio-psycho-social development of a child, and how a child's self-identity is formed within a relational matrix. You will be given the opportunity to explore your own self-identity because relationship based social work requires you to enhance your awareness of the self that you will take with you into your professional practice.

Chapter 4 builds on the theoretical bases of Chapters 2 and 3 by providing you with further opportunities to develop relational skills by use of practical exercises in self-awareness. You will explore who you are, and locate yourself as a unique person within the more general dimensions of social work theory, practice and values. The chapter introduces the LIFELINE exercise which will be built upon in succeeding chapters.

Chapter 5 switches the focus from knowing yourself to knowing the other person. It emphasises the importance of both reason and emotion in assessing human situations, and introduces central ideas such as the theory and the practice of emotional intelligence and empathy. As in previous chapters, you will be provided with experiential opportunities that enable you to see where these ideas have fitted into relationships in your own life.

Chapter 6 focuses upon the demanding nature of relationship based social work and the requirement placed upon workers to sustain themselves by the use of reflection, mindfulness and professional supervision. Thus, looking after oneself is seen as a necessary condition for looking after one's clients but, more than this, appropriate self-care is a way of developing oneself and finding satisfaction in one's professional career.

Chapter 7 is concerned with the ethical bases of relational practice. The principle based approach to social work is discussed, but it is shown how relationship based practice requires this to be complemented by the ethics of care. This form of ethics is founded on the personalities of workers in relationship, their wanting to do what is 'best', and the relational capabilities that they can use to facilitate this end.

Chapter 8 concludes the book by locating the worker-client relationship within the greater context of human co-existence. And, by referring to the self-awareness work done throughout the book, it brings back into focus the personal life of the social worker, showing how even the most difficult experiences in a worker's life can be used positively in their relationship based practice.