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Social Worker - Client Relationships: Social Worker Perspectives

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Abstract

Social worker - client relationship practice has always been and remains central to contemporary social work purpose and identity. The professional 'helping relationship' can and does enable change and alleviate distress. Nevertheless, what happens in social worker-client relationships remains unclear warranting research attention.

This article reports on a qualitative study that explored the lived experience of social worker-client relationships with 16 social workers employed in child and family welfare services in NSW and the ACT.

Findings confirmed the centrality of social worker-client relationships for achieving client outcomes and revealed a distinctive practice approach where the social worker-client relationship is seen as the workspace for the intervention, and the social worker acts as relationship building agent. Overall this constitutes a distinctive practice approach perhaps usefully described as Social Work Relationship Praxis (SWRP). The findings are discussed with reference to the literature and implications for research, practice and education are outlined.

Implications statement

- This study valorises the centrality of the social worker-client relationship for achieving client outcomes.
- A relational paradigm needs to be elevated in social work education to prepare students for practicing relationally.
- Development of social work practice theory needs to embrace relational views of ‘the self’.

Keywords: social worker-client relationship, relational, social work, practice, praxis

Social worker - client relationship practice has always been central to social work purpose and identity (Alexander & Charles 2009; Dybicz 2012; Ferguson 2016d; Folgheraiter & Raineri 2012; Healy 2012; Holmes and McDermid 2013; Howe 1998; Mandell 2007; Mishna et al. 2013; Payne 2006; Trevithick 2003, 2012). The professional ‘helping relationship’ can and does enable change and alleviate distress (Duncan, Miller, Wampold & Hubble, 2010; Ferguson, 2016c). Significant research has focused on ‘social worker-client relationship practice approaches (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010); social worker efficacy (Duncan et al., 2010; Gray, 2009; Marsh, Angell, Andrew & Curry, 2012); client experience of service (Beresford, Croft & Adshead, 2008; De Boar & Coady, 2007), and practice with particular groups of people (Bennett, Zubrzycki & Bacon, 2011; Bennett, Green, Gilbert & Bessarab, 2013). The impact of contemporary public sector management practices that diminish the support for a humanistic relational focus is also evident (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016; Trevithick, 2014). Nevertheless, what happens in social worker-client relationships remains unclear warranting research attention (Ferguson, 2016d; Forrester, Kershaw, Moss & Hughes,

2008; Winter, 2009; Trevithick, 2012) and the parameters of knowledge about social worker - client relationship practice are not clear (Trevithick, 2012; Healy, 2014).

The highly contextual and unique nature of each social worker-client relationship inhibits a single, universal definition, a problem exacerbated by the range of terms used to describe social worker-client relationship practice such as casework and case management. These considerations framed the research reported in this article which focused on social workers' lived experience of social worker client relationships.

The Social Worker - Client Relationship

The concept of the “social worker-client relationship” is variably described in the literature and in practice, and yet it retains a consistent core of underpinning humanistic principles (Payne, 2011) that implies the notion of care (Banks, 2012b; Bauman, 2000b), and acknowledges the centrality of power in the “self-other” dynamic. The social worker-client relationship is the vehicle in which empathy is conveyed, care is provided, experiences are shared, belonging is created and meaning making occurs (Howe, 2013). Relationships are integral to growth and development (Payne, 2011) and can also be places for abuse of power, leading to hurt, powerlessness, conflict and shame, and undermine developmental trajectories. Grounded in the messy reality of human relationships, social workers engage with people who are some of the most socially, politically and economically disadvantaged with the aim of instilling hope and change (Bland, Renouf & Tullgren, 2015; Collins, 2015; Miller & Rollnick, 2014). The humanistic perspective of social work respects relational experience and the complexity of being in relationships. For social workers in child and family welfare, engagement with clients has added complexity by virtue of practice ethics associated with juggling the dual and sometime contradictory responsibilities for care and for control (Banks, 2012b; Pettersen, 2012).

Trust, empathy, reliability, genuineness and transparency are confirmed as essential qualities in social worker-client relationships for achieving change (De Boer & Coady, 2007; Reimer, 2012). While these are established, how relationships are conducted by social workers is less clear although the social worker role has been described as the “practitioner’s ability to hold together the cognitive, emotional and practical aspects of a client’s life (to) provide(s) a sense of security and therefore reduce(s) anxiety” (Schofield, 1998, p.113).

Contemporary social worker-client relationship practice draws on a range of theoretical perspectives, practice theories, models and frameworks (Connolly & Harms, 2013; Healy, 2014; Maidment & Egan, 2016; Pease, Goldingay, Hosken & Nipperess, 2016). Skills required for social work engagement with clients typically include interpersonal skills, written communication skills, emotional intelligence (Howe, 2008a; Ingram, 2013) and self-regulation, critical reflection (Watts, 2018), ethical decision making, and organisational and analytical skills (Trevithick, 2012). Overall, social work practice with people requires exercising capacity for a particular type of “use of self” (Trevithick, 2018; Leichty, 2018).

A relational emphasis is re-emerging in social work literature (Hood, Brent, Abbott & Sartori, 2018; Furlong, 2013). It informs relationship - based practice (Ruch et al., 2010; Turney, 2012) and Relational-cultural theory (Miller & Stiver 2011; Freedberg, 2009). The enduring significance of the social worker-relationship is apparent in contemporary trauma informed practice (Cozolino, 2014; Knight, 2015; Levenson, 2017), online practice (La Mendola, 2010) and in forensic social work (Sheehan, 2014). Collective notions of relationship and kinship characteristic of indigenous cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are also influencing relationship thinking in social work (Bennett, et al., 2011).

This article presents findings from a study exploring the social worker-client relationship from the perspective of practising social workers. Key questions guiding the research were “How do frontline social workers in child and family welfare conceptualise their social worker - client relationship in their practice?” and “What significance do social workers attach to the relationship for achieving client outcomes?”

Method

Exploratory qualitative methodology was used for this study as the aim was to elicit social worker perspectives about their lived experience of social worker-client relationship practice. The study was granted ethics clearance by Monash University (No. CF10/3426 – 2010001807 – 1/3/2011).

The Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study. Project information, an Invitation to Participate and Consent Forms were sent to willing government and nongovernment child and family welfare organisations in NSW and the ACT, inviting qualified social workers experienced in direct practice with clients. The consent forms clearly stated the study was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time. Consent forms were received from 16 qualified social worker employees.

Data collection

Individual semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted with participants. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to over two hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were subsequently invited to a focus group where preliminary findings were presented and discussed. For practical reasons, two focus groups comprising of 10 of

the initial 16 participants were then each held in the ACT and in NSW to report and seek feedback about the final findings.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions were manually analysed as this encouraged close and repeated examination of responses. The thematic analysis identified open codes across all transcriptions to determine patterns and themes (Gibson and Brown, 2009), that addressed the question “How significant is the social worker-client relationship for achieving client outcomes?” The de-identified explanations and practice examples offered by the social workers to illustrate the significance of the relationship for achieving client outcomes also told a story about how the work is done. Further analysis was undertaken using Collaizzi’s step by step phenomenological analysis framework (Collaizzi, 1978 p.52).

Findings

The reiterative analysis method used built a picture about how social worker-client relationship practice is perceived as significant, how social workers do ‘relationship’ practice, including how they respond to relationship challenges, and the identification of unplanned beneficial outcomes that are perceived as resulting from the relationship itself. In the focus group, participants were also asked about terms that could most accurately name the emergent themes about the nature of social worker-client relationship practice. For example, the “relationship” was seen as more than a social transaction, it was also explained as the “place” where the work is done resulting in adoption of the term “relationship workspace”.

Findings confirmed the centrality of social worker-client relationships for achieving client outcomes and revealed a distinctive practice approach where the social worker-client relationship is seen as the workspace for the intervention, and the social worker acts as

relationship building agent. Given the findings significantly emerged from their contributions. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarised and then each of the findings is individually explained and illustrated with participant quotes. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of the names of the participants.

Demographic Characteristics

The sample comprised entirely of women which is consistent with the predominantly female social worker workforce (Healy & Lonne, 2010). The average age of participants was 39 years and only one identified as being from a non-Anglo ethnic background. Seven of the 16 participants had more than 10 years of direct practice experience of social work with children and families and all but three had over two years practice experience in the same field.

The Centrality of the Relationship for Achieving Outcomes

All participants in this study were emphatic that a relationship with the client is essential for achieving client outcomes and can further lead to unplanned beneficial outcomes called sequels which are: enabling a person to build an interpersonal connection with another person, making the experience of being in a meaningful relationship possible, generating hope and purpose about the client's life, building clients' trust in 'the system' and encouraging clients to take a risk for their own growth.

Social workers explained that many clients report to them that they do not have any meaningful relationships in their lives. Julie commented "The relationships clients build with their caseworkers can be some of the strongest relationships they've got in their lives and some of the most consistent".

Fear of relationships and of people was an observation shared amongst participants about their clients and articulated here by Louise:

there is a huge group of people that live with dread and fear (about relationships), so openness and honesty about what you're doing, why you're doing it and how you're doing it and what you will do if something goes (wrong) is really important.

The importance attached to relationship building was seen as a way of encouraging client trust in others and in "the system", described in this way:

A lot of the families that we work with, I'd say about 50% have been let down, or feel let down by other services, and so trust is actually delivering on what you say that you are going to do, arriving for appointments and following through on things (Cara).

Building, Retaining, Retrieving and Repairing the Relationship Workspace

The uniqueness of each relationship demands a sustained focus on intervention purpose and goals. At the same time, social workers are focused on developing, retaining, retrieving and repairing these relationships that in turn, can also enhance the client's own relationship capacity. Themes that captured how this is achieved were: "being-with" the client and immersed in the client's perspective of their world, establishing a sense of "we-ness" and being sensitive and responsive to the client's and their own capacity for relational proximity.

Social workers cited using incidental moments in their interactions to facilitate learning about "being in" relationships and linking this learning to the client's experience of relationship with children and others in their lives.

The relationship process that unfolds is often not predictable or smooth as it can involve disruptions and ruptures. Nevertheless, through maintaining engagement with the client through relationship disruptions, opportunities do open up that can result in healing, enhanced relationship capacity and personal growth.

The relationship building role that reflects social worker sensitivity to, and focus on, a client's capacity for entering a relationship process was seen as a continuing concern of relationship practice for the duration of the intervention. Social workers expressed a sensitivity towards the "relational" dispositions of the clients and that social workers rely heavily on their "relational know-how" to guide their actions towards clients. In one instance, social worker Dianne spoke about a mother whose child was in the care of Dianne's agency's foster care program. In every interaction, the client was abusive and aggressive towards her. Believing this behaviour to be a reflection of the parent's struggle with her for power over decision-making about her child, Dianne explained that, with a lot of work, she and the mother eventually achieved a constructive relationship where

The mother is now is able to say to me, 'You know me, don't get me upset'. When she verbally erupts with us, she does come back and talk to us in a reasonable way. She's not abusive to us any longer (Dianne).

This example illustrates the notion of tolerance for relational proximity that concurs with Miller's assertion that clients of child protection services 'are exquisitely sensitive to blame' (Miller, 2016, p.119). Other social workers indicated that being sensitive to a client's tolerance for relational proximity, is critical to a 'relationship' continuing or not. The capacity to "be-with" a client in their pain was a recurring theme in the interviews and focus groups and indicates social worker knowledge about the effects of trauma on human development, emotional regulation, and self-efficacy (Knight, 2015; Perry and Sullivan, 2014). Located within changeable, complex and statutory context of child and family welfare and informed by social work values and ethics, the medium of relationship provides social workers with an approach that respects client capacity for relationship.

Social workers described building the relationship as a process and that the relationship itself becomes the workspace, a notion that is more complex and nuanced than casework theory suggests. While progressing stated intervention goals was seen as paramount, social workers nevertheless maintained that the relationship they had with a client was the most important aspect of their work. Building a relationship is an emotionally demanding and evolving process that also offers potential for healing, growth and enhanced capacity for engaging with others. Encapsulated by the colloquialism “walking the walk”, social workers spoke about how essential it is to “sit-with” the client, not only as they tell their story, but throughout the intervention. “being-with” the client enables immersion in the client’s perspective of their world and helps to establish a sense of “we-ness” which encourages client commitment. “Being-with” is a Heideggerian term that refers to the notion that we *become* through our engagement with others: that our identity formation and self-knowledge is a relational process (Heidegger, 1978).

Building a relationship requires social workers to be both empathic and respectful and also attuned and responsive to the challenges ‘being in’ relationships can present for a client - to feel encouraged, motivated and hopeful about engaging with them as a professional in “the system”. Developing and maintaining relationships carries risks for the social worker. Social workers explained that perceived client mistrust demands patience to embark on a process of “being-with” [the client] from the outset. As Helen said

I think you have to be able to care and nurture. With this comes the risk of being hurt or feeling a failure at times; however, if you engage with clients without bringing that empathy and compassion, so you don’t get hurt, what’s the point?

The social workers explained that where the client comes to feel that they can trust the social worker, they are open to the prospect of having a positive relational experience, benefits that

potentially extend beyond the life of the intervention and which helps with trauma recovery, precipitating “future” thinking and ultimately personal growth.

As stated, the social worker-client relationship is often tenuous and precarious. Social workers seem to assume responsibility for “carrying the relationship” with the client for the course of the intervention, not unlike the notion of parental reflective functioning articulated by Slade (2005).

Social workers identified that actively keeping the clients and other relevant people informed and up to date with planned and unplanned changes as they occur is a commonly used strategy for maintaining the relationship that supports the work to continue. While time consuming, this kind of monitoring and responsiveness is regarded as essential work that helps establish the sense of “we-ness” with the client and for securing the client commitment to the relationship. Retaining client engagement is “the most challenging part of the work, it feels endless at times”, as Cara further explains,

Relationship practice is really challenging. You can have periods where it is difficult to truly go into the work at hand, because you’re constantly being battered, when you are dealing with the same issues at every single meeting. ...you try different approaches to try and engage with someone, such as using your supervision, maybe using a second worker. I had to do that with one case because the conversations would often go round and round. The client would always start by contesting what I had said or hadn’t said on the previous occasion. Their focus on continuously arguing about the content of the previous meeting, meant we didn’t get to the work at hand. So, then I visited the client with a second worker by way of offering another perspective, and this was helpful, and the interaction moved forward. The client can also bring in a second person and that can be helpful for them as well (Cara).

According to the social workers this type of experience is not uncommon. Resolving difficulties, including relationship ruptures (Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006), disengagement and conflict are everyday parts of the work and seen as a core practice aim. Sarah's example below illustrates the thinking that guides her when engaging with a client.

If you have a difficult beginning with a client, it's very hard to re-engage with that client again. I think you have to do a lot of back work so you really need to get that first point of contact with the client nearly perfect. In our work sometimes it's not planned work – especially when we're going out sort of cold calling but showing respect for the client that you know they're as fearful about us coming into their lives as we may be about approaching them about a child protection concern and having – well for me that's what I would have is that 'how would I feel if I had a social worker come to my door about concerns about my children'?

Strategies used to restore or strengthen an engagement with a client include: regular visits to the client, being flexible, within limits, about where visits occur; working out with the client what would help them make changes; ensuring that the adults are part of decision-making around the difficulties; and encouraging them to see what can be done and what they are comfortable with, while supporting them to understand the seriousness of the work to be done. As Julie explains:

It helps if they can come to believe that we are there for the same reason they are – for the children and for them to continue parenting them.

“Getting stuck” at times with client relationships was also identified as common experience as Helen indicates:

I'm working with a family who have a long-term relationship with this organisation. The children aren't living with their parents at the moment. The parents have a long history of antagonistic behaviour with the agency and others and so I have a poor relationship with this parent. I can't move things forward, and the outcomes for the children are unknown at the moment, because while this behaviour continues, there's nothing that can be achieved except continued disharmony. The situation is not moving in a positive way, though ultimately, I think it can for the children and this would be by not including the parents. This is particularly challenging both personally and professionally for me. I know the power I hold in this position in decision-making and with reference to court Orders. This is a massive decision, and I want to think the family can move forward, but it's like there's a brick wall there. My thoughts today are to use mediation. I have tried many things, different strategies, but there's just such little connection.

This reflection illustrates the engagement challenges involved in relationship practice and offers insight into the way the worker is thinking about what she believes can or cannot be done to progress the situation. Helen's feelings of hope and optimism about what can be done exist alongside her concerns for the children's wellbeing. In addition, her awareness of her power in the situation and the gravity of the decision that potentially excludes the parent in the child's life are also weighing on her mind.

Social workers reiterated that being honest with the client is critical to this aim that carries risks for the social worker, the client and the relationship workspace. Jessica, a foster care worker, recounted a difficult conversation she had had with the biological father of a 4-year-old child placed in the care of the foster care program. Jessica explained that the father had recently completed a four-year prison sentence and wanted to resume regular contact with his

young son. As per Court orders, the father was entitled to four supervised face-to-face contacts each year. Jessica explained that when she reiterated this to the father, he became angry with her. Over several subsequent interviews with the father, Jessica said she had to restate and explain the court's decision to limit his contact with his son. Her view was that even though this was difficult news for him to digest and a difficult task for her a point was reached where he accepted the Court's decision and was even able to acknowledge that it was best for his son's wellbeing. While this process took time, patience and persistence for both the father and for Jessica, the father's eventual acknowledgement was an important achievement for him, for the intervention and for the child's wellbeing. Jessica said that she and the father were able to identify things he could do to maintain a presence in his child's life, including attending each visit. Jessica's example illustrates how she fulfilled her professional role to maintain the child's safety, wellbeing and care arrangements while being honest with the father about what was and was not possible or negotiable regarding his contact with his son. The nuances of navigating relationships explained by Jessica with this example, was confirmed by Julie who explained that "It helps if they can come to believe that we are there for the same reason they are – for the children and for them to continue parenting them".

Persistent assessment of the quality of the relationship with the client, is seen as essential to supporting the change process, retaining the workspace and being ready to respond to eventualities including client reluctance, disengagement and conflict. Where relationships rupture, social workers see it as their responsibility to encourage the client to work through this so that the relationship can be repaired, and work can continue. This aspect of relationship practice is regarded as being instrumental to enhancing the clients' capacity and confidence to be in relationships.

Discussion

The Social Worker as Relationship Building Agent (RBA)

The term Relationship Building Agent was coined by the author in conjunction with focus group participants to explicate the way social workers explained their role in relationship practice. The findings show that the RBA role requires considerable emotional labour to work “relationally”. It appears that the social workers in this study were always mindful of, and attuned to, the client’s capacity for relationships and their tolerance for relational proximity, a stance informed by their understanding about the effects of having experienced and endured troubled relationship histories and complex trauma, and the legacy of mistrust and lack of confidence and capacity for engaging in safe, trusting and life-giving relationships that stays with many clients as a result of this history. It is this understanding that seems to underpin the relational emphasis and relational ‘know-how’ seen as integral to doing this work.

Social Worker Relationship Praxis (SWRP)

The centrality of the social worker-client relationship for achieving outcomes, the construction of the relationship as a workspace and the role of the social worker as relationship building agent (RBA) can be seen as three components of a distinctive practice approach. Social Worker Relationship Praxis (see Figure 1) is a term that provides a way of conceptualising and synthesising these three practice components, where praxis is defined as:

The kind of action people are engaged in when they think about what their action will mean *in the world*. *Praxis* is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what it is *best* to do, they *act*, (emphases in original) (Kinsella & Pitman 2012, p. 150).

Insert Figure 1 about here")

Figure 1: Social Worker Relationships Praxis (SWRP)

As this study shows, SWRP demands a sophisticated capacity to withstand unpredictability, to respond ethically, flexibly and adaptively while keeping an eye on intervention goals.

SWRP provides opportunity for learning about and experiencing safe relationships; this is of particular relevance for those with troubled relationship histories and experience of complex trauma.

Studies that have examined engagement in social worker - client relationships (Ferguson, 2016d; Hood et al., 2018; Winter, 2016) have not found the relational emphasis revealed in this study, or the depth of understanding that social workers in this study expressed about how difficult it can be for a client to engage with a social worker.

Limitations

This study did not include client perspectives of the social worker-client relationship. While this was considered at length, the key aim of the study was confined to accessing social workers' lived experience of being in relationships with clients. Furthermore, clients engaged with child and family services are typically experiencing distress in their lives, which includes the stress of being subject to the professional gaze (Buckley, Carr & Whelan, 2011). This raised ethical issues that could not be justified for this study. The entirely female and predominantly Anglo backgrounds of the sample could be constructed as a limitation

however it is representative of the social worker workforce. Nevertheless, exploring SWRP with social workers of diverse genders, background is needed. Finally, given the small size of this study, the findings need to be explored with social workers practising in other fields.

Conclusion and implications

The findings concur with the literature and valorise the importance of the social worker-client relationship in practice, its humanistic values and that it is complex, skilled work. The study extends existing conceptualisations by indicating that a relational lens permeates social worker thinking about their practice in SWRP. The significance of this study lies in considering the social worker-client relationship as a holistic concept and foregrounds the role of the social worker's praxis in this work.

The relational lens is informed by knowledge about human relationships: child-parent attachment theory, children's development, knowledge about the effects of trauma on relationship capacity (Colozino, 2014), trauma informed practice including that disruption and repair of relationships is an inherent part of engagement. The experience of working with a social worker, and others involved, including family members and service providers, can instil hope, increase the client's trust in "the system" and in "the world" and enhance relational capacity and efficacy.

SWRP requires social worker integration of relational, emotional and practice knowledge including critical reflection, empathic relating, well developed use of self in practice, emotional intelligence, patience, perseverance and considerable emotional energy that enables retaining engagement with the client "through thick and thin". SWRP is informed by the knowledge that long term experience of troubled relationship histories makes trusting other people difficult.

Overall, the study provides fresh insight about how social workers think about their relationships with clients in practice and has given voice to social workers about their practice. It is hoped the study's findings stimulate discussion and research about SWRP and elevate the relational paradigm in social work education and practice, as this will support social work's claim to "relationship" knowledge.

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One Figure only

Figure developed using Word shapes and SmartArt. Saved in TIFF (tagged image file format)

Figure: Social Worker Relationships Praxis (SWRP) to be placed, see p.16 of manuscript

