

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

**BY PRINCIPAL
SOCIAL WORKERS**

EDITED BY
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INTRODUCTION

Tanya Moore

Social work is a relational practice. Social workers work within the context and container of relationships and reflect carefully on all there is to be learned from them. Conscious attention to empathetic connection is particular to social work and we know from people who use our services that this relational drive is key.

But we're busy. We're under so much pressure to get things done that we risk losing sight of the primary importance of this human connection. It's the role of Principal Social Workers (PSWs) to create balance between meeting demand and maintaining the standards essential for thoughtful, informed and personalised practice. There are PSWs in both adults and children's services and all are responsible for leading on social work practice within their authority. Some Children's PSWs use the title PCFSW (Principal Child and Families Social Worker), but for ease I'm using the term PSW to cover both adults' and children's roles.

The PSW role comes in different forms depending on the size of the local authority. Some PSWs work at team management level, others are placed higher up the management structure working as service heads or directors. Some have standalone PSW roles overseeing quality and direction of practice across the organisation. Others have hybrid roles that include responsibility for specific services. All function at the strategic level of the Professional Capabilities Framework for social workers, champion the rights of citizens using services and advise the Directors of Adult and Children's social care on

practice matters. All are highly skilled and experienced social workers and leaders with a passionate belief in the power of practice to support people to get to where they want to be in life.

It's such passion that has led to the creation of this book. *Principles of Practice* sprang from an animated discussion between a small group of eastern region PSWs in a restaurant in King's Cross. We were in what we hoped would be the tail end of the Covid-19 pandemic and were discussing the different meanings of resilience to people using services, social workers and service providers. The dramatic improvement in online communication at the start of the pandemic had been a significant factor in our own resilience as it meant we'd been able to meet regularly, form a bond and share support. We'd found the local and national PSW online networks to be a rich source of insight and direction. We wondered at the vast amount of practice knowledge and experience held nationally at PSW level and struck upon the idea of a book to offer a wider platform for PSW thinking. We reached out to a small number of PSWs who we thought might be interested in writing for the book and put a note in the PSW newsletter inviting more. The ask was for current or former PSWs to write about an aspect of practice that's particularly important to them and the result is the plethora of practice principles you're about to read here.

Social work is multi-faceted and each chapter represents just one area of interest for the writer. Of course, PSWs have many practice passions and there are easily enough ideas for chapters to fill more books on practice principles. But however broad the topics presented here, the unifying theme is clear. Social work happens through relationships.

The chapters

Relational connection is the focus of Chapter 1, in which Sarah Range describes some of the key relationships from early in her career and reflects on the impact they've had upon her understanding of social work. If our practice is based upon relationships, she argues, social workers must be given the reflective space needed to process their emotional impact.

Relational practice extends beyond the time spent with people to the way we write about them; we know our written records have the power to cause

distress and trauma either now or when people feel ready to look at their files in the future. Recording must be accurate but also sensitive and respectful. In Chapter 2, Fiona Hayward shares examples from Wiltshire's Ways of Writing project in which recording is completed with the child in mind meaning it is written as a letter that the child might read when they're older. Writing directly to the child offers a way of helping their future self make sense of what happened when they were younger and extends the power of the relationship with their social worker as a model for sensitivity, understanding and strengths-based thinking.

Good recording can be seen as evidence of relationship-based practice. As can the response of people to our attempts to connect. In Chapter 3, Claudia Megele presents the EMPOWER model of relationship-based practice. Co-created with 180 social workers, EMPOWER offers a series of questions to help social workers reflect upon the relational elements of our work and serves as a helpful reflective checklist for relationship-based practice.

But relational connection presents its own challenge. In Chapter 4, I argue that such challenge has led to the oversimplification of the powerful potential of strengths-based social work. True application of strengths approach creates relational vulnerability and I suggest that we may unconsciously protect ourselves from such vulnerability by locating strengths practice in the stable of '*positive psychology*' approaches. I propose a new model of Relationships and Reciprocity in which relational connection remains the containing factor to strengths approach but there's capacity to acknowledge the painful presence of need for help and support while also responding to the shared need for two-way connection.

Relational practice recognises the importance of all relationships. In Chapter 5, Fran Leddra tells two stories from practice in which community connections enabled people to keep themselves safe. Both stories show the importance of acknowledging need for support as well as a will to contribute, and show that with genuine two-way connections people can develop a sense of safety and belonging. Good safeguarding practice, argues Fran, is often about knowing when social workers should step back and allow the power of the community to step up.

The seemingly unlimited scope of online community brings a different set of advantages and challenges. In Chapter 6, Claudia Megele extends her

relational gaze to relationships formed on social media. The positive potential of online community connection was demonstrated during the Covid pandemic, but its anonymity and invisibility have created a different set of safeguarding considerations. Boundaries between work and home and online and offline presence have been significantly blurred, and Claudia highlights a need for a sophisticated grasp of e-professionalism for social workers.

Within our work, it's often the '*ordinary stuff*', such as being called by our name or being able to see a dentist, that needs to be protected. Hannah Scaife presents the protection of such basic dignity as social justice and calls for social workers to stand alongside citizens to ensure rights aren't breached. In Chapter 7 on human rights and social justice, Hannah presents our role in noticing what matters and helping people gain and maintain control of their lives.

The major structural challenges to social justice are climate change, poverty and racism, and as social workers we must concern ourselves with all three. In the face of such oppressive forces, social work must organise a professional response at organisational, local and national level, but we must also take individual action to make the changes that are within our gift.

Tendai Murowe links poverty and environmental degradation to families' inability to keep their children safe. Tendai's research found a high level of environmental awareness among social workers, but climate change must be a professional as well as a personal issue for social workers and Tendai makes a clear connection between climate change and the immediate lives of the people we support. Chapter 8 demands that social workers take up the agency we have and lead the way on environmental responsibility.

In Chapter 9, Lisa Aldridge demands that we draw upon our radical social work roots and recognise poverty as an affront to human rights. Lisa challenges social workers completing assessments to be explicit about the causes and personal impact of poverty. Locating the Poverty Aware Social Work Paradigm firmly within the context of relationship-based practice, Lisa calls upon social workers to highlight the social injustice that leads to poverty and to stand in solidarity with the people most impacted.

I originally received five offers for chapters on anti-racism for this book but, for the sake of balance, took the difficult editorial decision to restrict this to two entries. Sara Taylor's chapter, Chapter 10, details her work to become an anti-racist leader. Using the '*Social GRRRAACCEEESSS*' as a reference point, Sara explores her own position in relation to privilege and power and describes the steps taken by her organisation to open up awareness and dialogue and make purposeful moves towards becoming an anti-racist organisation.

In Chapter 11 Godfred Boahen examines racial dynamics in supervision and presents a table of how power manifests in supervision through the possible racial dyads, such as '*White supervisor, Black supervisee*' or '*Black supervisor, White Supervisee*'. Racial and power dynamics are present in all possible dyads, notes Godfred, even where both supervisor and supervisee identify as the same '*race*'. Godfred's table of supervision dyads should form the basis of every supervision agreement as it offers awareness of and ability to articulate the complex racial dynamics that must be noticed, named and examined if they are to be overcome.

Many local authorities have revised their training offer to ensure anti-racism features prominently and social workers have sought out further awareness and understanding through podcasts, reading and videos. This is an example of social workers making it our own business to develop our knowledge. Continuing professional development or CPD is a requirement of social work registration. It's not difficult to fulfil because social workers love CPD. But even CPD has an important relational element to consider. In Chapter 12, I suggest our relationship with CPD is likely to be heavily influenced by our original relationship with learning; if we were happy learning at school, we're likely to be happy learning now. But, just as when we were younger, learning was likely to have been easier if people around us took a supportive interest, so we can support each other's CPD by building an active interest in CPD into the life of our teams.

We should also consider how we can build social workers' well-being into the culture of our teams. In Chapter 13, Leire Agirre continues the animated King's Cross discussion by presenting resilience as an interaction between the worker, the workplace, the culture and the physical environment. Relational focus isn't just between social worker and client; it extends to the ways social workers look out for one another and look after ourselves.

POVERTY AND THE NEED FOR RADICAL RELATIONAL PRACTICE

Lisa Aldridge

For Mum

Introduction

I am honoured to have an opportunity to contribute to this book through writing a chapter on poverty. As for many people who move into helping professions, childhood experiences motivated me to do something that would both create change for myself and make a difference to others. I have clear memories of growing up in our council house in a village outside of Bristol at times when my mum, as our breadwinner, would struggle to find money to make ends meet – this was as a result of low-paid work, my father being in the fire brigade strikes in the 1970s and then his being in and out of mental health hospitals for a number of years. My mum would eat jam sandwiches so that my sister and I could eat proper meals. I was lucky. I never went hungry. Decades later, families are continuing to have to go without the very basics that they need to survive: quality food, housing and heating.

The context of the current cost-of-living crisis means that, more than ever, social workers must be sensitive and responsive to the presence of poverty. Poverty is a consistent contextual factor for many of the children and families we support, but to what extent does our practice acknowledge poverty as a

structurally influencing factor? Do we pay enough attention to the impact of poverty and do we recognise the role of social work in addressing it?

In this chapter I'll explore the potential for poverty-informed social work practice and will conclude that to challenge the structural, address the practical and respond to the emotional impact of poverty, social work should develop a poverty-aware relational approach from its own radical roots.

What does poverty look like in the UK today?

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) defines poverty as living on 60 per cent or below of the median income and not being able to afford certain essential items and activities. According to its Poverty Profile (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022a), 14.5 million people in the UK are living in poverty. This includes 4.3 million children and 2.1 million pensioners.

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG, nda) report that, in the UK, 46 per cent of children of global majority families and 26 per cent of children in white British families live in poverty; 49 per cent of children living in poverty are growing up in single parent families; 75 per cent of children growing up in poverty live in a household where at least one person works, demonstrating that poverty is not only an issue only for families who are out of work and supported through benefits.

We need to talk about poverty. Analysis undertaken by the JRF (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022b) found that April 2022 marked the greatest fall in the value of the basic rate of out-of-work benefit in 50 years. Their survey of people living in deep poverty (40 per cent or below of median income) found 5.2 million low-income households where family members had cut down, skipped meals or gone hungry because there wasn't enough money for food. A total of 3.2 million households had been unable to adequately heat their home and 4.6 million were in arrears on at least one bill. Ten years of cuts and freezes to benefits, including the introduction of the benefit cap in 2013 and its lowering in 2016, followed by the two-child limit introduced for children born after 2017, particularly targets larger families who are most vulnerable to being in deep poverty.

Impact of poverty on children and families

As well as rendering families unable to pay for rent, bills, food, clothing and other necessities, poverty can create disadvantages in terms of health outcomes, life expectancy, psychological well-being, mental health, educational outcomes and lifetime opportunities for children.

CPAG (ndb) describes how surviving on a low or inadequate income impacts upon parental stress, family dynamics and relationships. Poverty can impact children's friendships (bullying, access to school trips, being embarrassed to bring friends home), their mental health (anxiety, stress, worry about parents, insecurity and sense of hopelessness) and their aspirations and outcomes. Children who have lived in persistent poverty in their first seven years have cognitive development scores of an average 20 per cent below other children.

Parents experiencing poverty may have to take multiple jobs and/or shift work, impacting upon the extent to which they are able to supervise older children. Parents may experience stress, depression or other mental health problems as a result of structural oppression, and this may impact upon their parenting capacity. Children who experience poverty may feel different and even ashamed. Older children may want to help their parents make ends meet or they may want to be able to buy clothing or other items that increase their social status, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation during adolescence.

Children and families social work

Within social work, many of the families we support are on low incomes, often living in poor quality, temporary or overcrowded accommodation. Many were struggling to make ends meet before the Covid-19 pandemic but are finding things even harder now. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project (Bywaters and Featherstone, 2020) found that deprivation was a major factor in children coming into care and being supported through Child Protection Plans. Poverty is a pervasive and interwoven factor creating a context for neglect, interacting with other needs and risks such as parental mental health, domestic abuse, substance misuse and extra-familial harm.