HELPFUL
SOCIAL WORK

Integrity & Context

aiming to help social workers learn, think and act with integrity so that people who need social work get help that will transform their lives

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Foreword

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Social work has the power to change people's lives for the better.

We started Helpful Social Work as a podcast to help social workers learn, think and act with integrity so that people who need social work get help that will transform their lives.

Social work helps those, who would otherwise lack the resources to manage, maintain or restore their lives. Social work is rooted in the idea that nobody gets thrown away. Everything that social work does is a moral activity because it is work with people.

Social work demands a commitment of the whole person – Houston talks about using the head to think, the heart to feel, the hands to act and the feet to move forward. It requires commitment, knowledge and skill to be done well. Anyone could turn up at someone's house with a list of questions to ask them about their life. Few people could ask these questions in a way that helped them to find out how things really were for that person, and fewer still would then be able to offer something genuinely helpful. Sometimes social work finds practical solutions to difficulties, sometimes it offers help to make things more bearable, sometimes it can only offer a companion for the loss or grief that people feel. However, it always changes lives and it does this through relationship. The relationship enables us to walk with that person and to learn how best to empower them. Social work is only possible if social workers are prepared to use themselves. They have to get involved.

We need to hold onto the potential of social work to make a profound difference to people's lives.

In our podcast and now this book, based on the podcasts, we offer our contribution to this work. We want to speak as truly as we can about what we know from research, from our own experience and from others about what will make a positive difference to the children, families and adults that social work exists to help.

We aspire for greatness in social work because we see it as a crucial agent for liberty, equality and justice. Our background is in social work, social work management and social work development. Jo has worked primarily with children and families, in Australia and the UK; Gerry has worked with adults, including voluntary work in Russia.

We are unapologetic about our desire to enthuse social workers to change the world. With passion, compassion and commitment, this role can make a dramatic difference to social work. We also don't mind if you disagree with us, so long as we get people thinking.

We encourage, support and challenge social workers to take responsibility for the potential they have to inspire and help others.

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Structure

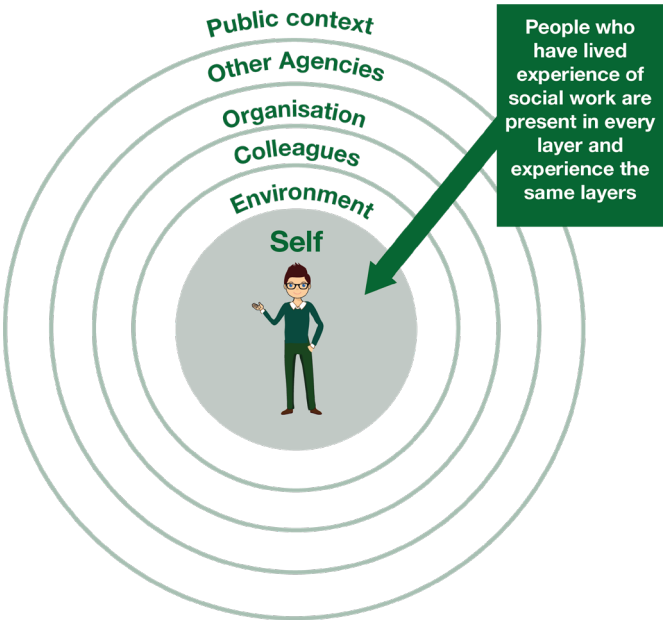
In these podcasts, we discuss social work from the individual outwards to the social context.

Series 1

Podcasts from Series 1, 1a-10a cover our own integrity and values, our environment and colleagues, and start to look at our organisation.

Series 2

Podcasts from Series 2, 1a-10a, go on to think more about our organisation, other agencies and the public.



All of these areas affect how well we are able to maintain our integrity and to fulfil our role. We start with ourselves and then work outwards to consider the layers that influence us.

In each podcast, we start with a quote from the BASW Code of Ethics. This is our guide to professional behaviour in the UK.

We then have a definition of the area that we are talking about. We are fascinated by language and find insight in thinking about what words really mean and where they come from.

This is followed by a reflective story that roots the topic in our own experience.

We explore the topic, drawing on theory, evidence and experience. We look at factors that can either empower or frustrate social workers. We also look at what can support you to understand and use these factors to help you to work well.

At the end we provide an exercise that you can do, and some reflection points to help you think through what has been shared and decide how you might use it. You can use these as part of your professional development, with others, or as prompts for your thinking. We also provide suggested further reading.

When we are aware of ourselves and our surroundings, we can act more deliberately. We can maintain our integrity – our ethics, health and ability to use our whole self.

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Contents

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Series 1

1a Integrity

Social workers have a responsibility to apply the professional values and principles set out above to their practice. They should act with integrity and treat people with compassion, empathy and care. (BASW Code of Ethics, 3)

Integrity –

1. Steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code: trueness to self
2. The state of being unimpaired: soundness
3. The quality or condition of being whole or undivided: completeness

From Latin integras meaning soundness, from integer meaning whole or complete.

Mrs C was from the Ukraine. I had been advised by the Geriatrician and Staff Nurse that she needed to go into a care home. When I turned up, Mrs C had the Daily Mail open to a story about the horrors of care homes. “I’m not going into one of those”, she said.

We looked at options, which were not good: help with all personal care and household tasks required; limited resources from the local authority; limited savings for Mrs C; limited space in her first-floor flat. Mrs C was ‘medically stable’ so when the hospital hit red alert I was asked to move her to a care home.

Mrs C did me the honour of trusting me when I said that, if she went to the care home, I would come and visit her the next day to keep planning how she would get home. By then, I was in email contact with her son in the Ukraine. I had figured out what the minimum support was that she would need at home. We were doing the sums to get her back there.

Mrs C was in the care home for four long weeks. I visited her regularly and she believed that I was doing my best. She hated it but she hung on. When she got home to sit in her own chair, she received me as if she was the Queen.

Trueness to self

Social workers need to be models of integrity, acting in line with what we think is right to achieve what we consider important.

Our ability to thrive begins with our intrinsic motivation for our work. We may receive recognition and be valued by others but this is not a given in any job. In contrast, our internal motivation is within our control. We can reflect on the reasons that we are in this

field and we can look for examples of when we were thriving and when we were just surviving. What were the moments that made us thrive? These are the moments that we are being truest to ourselves, when we are able to be the person we wanted to be in this work.

Social work is work with people. There is always uncertainty and there is always the possibility of failure. Our response can be to zealously follow process and avoid risk at all costs. Alternatively, we can embrace uncertainty and the potential it offers. We can use all of who we are - our intellect, our emotions, our capabilities – to build relationships, to learn and to make judgements that change the way that people's lives unfold.

When we act against our values and principles then we chip away at our potential to make a difference. We need to have enough moments when what we do is in tune with the best person we can be. This not only keeps us inspired, it also keeps us inspiring to others. People can spot pretend concern and forced effort. People can also see if we are acting against what we think is right. Work with people is always ethical work. We need to be models of integrity, acting in line with what we think is right to achieve what we consider important. People we work with need to see that we are not just working for our own gain but for their good.

Soundness

Social workers have to maintain resilience and sustain themselves in challenging circumstances.

Research shows that resilience doesn't come from never having problems. It comes from experiencing difficulties and coping. We mustn't be afraid of taking on struggles to achieve change for the people we work with. However, we must be smart about how we do this, using all the information, skill and support that we can.

In social work it, you need to hold yourself together in order to be a safe place for others. Social workers witness terrible things, as well as terribly hopeful moments, and they are containers for these. We have to have the strength to bear witness to someone's story without taking it from them. We have to be able to find a way to walk alongside them out of the place they are in, or to stay with them if there is no place to go. We can't do this if we aren't thriving – if we aren't whole.

Emotional intelligence provides the foundation upon which to build resilience. Goleman explains that it involves paying attention to how we and others feel so that we can motivate ourselves and persist in the face of frustrations; control impulses and delay gratification; regulate our moods and keep distress from swamping our ability to think; empathise with others and remain hopeful. We will catch emotions and experience the secondary trauma of witnessing people's distress. However, we can learn to recognise this, acknowledge it and seek support.

Emotional intelligence helps us to build up skills, which Reivich and Schatte identified support resilience. These demand practice and effort. To be resilient we need to be aware of and understand our responses and those of others. We can then start to manage our response and reduce or adapt behaviours that would undermine our resilience. We can learn to reflect before reacting to people and situations, so that we respond in a thought out way. Most importantly, we can develop our sense of optimism that we will be able to thrive. This stops us from being paralysed by problems. As we try out new responses, our resilience grows.

We need to thrive in social work because we are relating directly to people who, for one reason or another, are not thriving. We need to model optimism and resourcefulness to children, adults and families. They have often been victims and we need to show them something different.

Completeness

Social workers need to use their whole self to achieve the kind of difference that is possible in social work.

Social work is work done with the head and heart, hands and feet. We need to think deeply about what we are here to do and how we are doing. We need to understand our feelings and use our emotions. We need to act carefully and deliberately. And we need to observe ourselves and receive feedback from others.

Our monitoring of ourselves should be curious and critical. It should focus on our whole self – who we really are. We learn about who we are by reflecting on what we think, feel and do. As we build up a picture of our true self, we can see where the strengths and weaknesses are, what will sustain and help us and what could undermine us.

Really knowing ourselves in the situation that we work in gives us the opportunity to be the best manager we can be. It enables us to use our whole self to make a difference. And it enables us to act in ways that keep us in one piece, and sustain us. Our willingness and effort to know and use our whole self is the best example we could set.

Exercise
Reflecting on the seven skills of resilience

This exercise helps you to think about your behaviour during the day.

Make a note of the seven skills of resilience:

1. **Emotional awareness and regulation** – the ability to identify what you are feeling and when necessary, the ability to control your feelings.
2. **Empathy** – the ability to read and understand the emotions of others. This is important to resilience for two reasons; first it helps build relationships with others and then this gives social support.
3. **Impulse control** – the ability to tolerate ambiguity so you do not rush to make decisions. Thinking before acting.
4. **Causal Analysis** – the ability to think comprehensively about the problems you confront. It enables you to look at a problem from many perspectives and consider many factors.
5. **Optimism** – having an optimistic explanatory style that is realistic and facilitates problem solving.
6. **Self-efficacy** – your confidence in your ability to solve problems. This includes knowing your strengths and weaknesses and relying on your strengths to cope.
7. **Reaching out** – being prepare to take appropriate risk, being willing to try new things and thinking of failure as part of life. Asking for and accepting help.

Consider any actions you have taken that have enabled you to practice these skills, and any that have stopped you from using these skills. What led you to act in that way? What happened as a result?

Conclusion

Working with integrity is not easy. However, it is worth it for the potential it gives us to make a difference. This potential comes from our motivation, from being able to sustain ourselves in our role and from drawing on our whole self.

Children, families and adults who require social care services will have a resourceful, empathetic, optimistic practitioner to work alongside them on the difficult journeys they are making.

Questions for reflection

Why am I a social worker?

How do I maintain my integrity - trueness to myself; soundness; and completeness?

Further reading

Reivich K and Schatte A (2003) **The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles,** Broadway Books

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

2a Values

The aim is to encourage social workers across the UK to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case in accordance with the values of the profession. (BASW Code of Ethics, 1.1)

Value -

A principle or standard, as of behaviour, that is considered important or desirable

from the Latin valere meaning to be strong, to be well or to be of value

I had a social worker in my team who asked me: “Can I hire a car to take Donna to a meeting?” The social worker owned her own car so I asked her why she couldn’t use it. “Because she smells so badly that last time it took me a week to get rid of the smell and I don’t want my car to be ruined.” Donna was 17 years-old. I asked the social worker how long she had smelled: “Always.” So I asked what the social worker had done about it. She said that it wasn’t respectful to say anything.

So, it was respectful for us to talk about this young woman behind her back, it was respectful to rent a car to avoid saying anything about our views, but it wasn’t respectful to talk to her directly about our judgement of her. There was something really wrong with these values.

Our history and experience

Through our history and experience, we acquire a framework for understanding what is going on around us that we can apply to new situations in order to make sense of them. We adopt rules of thumb to help us make rapid judgements.

Humans have evolved to spot patterns and to work on probabilities. They allow us to make rapid, intuitive judgements that save time and to home in on likely possibilities. This saves us a lot of time, unless we are wrong. Evidence suggests that social workers do not tend to come up with a range of hypotheses. Instead they look for facts to support the initial view that they form through drawing on their experience. This can result in misguided efforts to solve a problem, based on an incorrect assumption about what the problem is. It is, therefore, important to understand the shortcuts that we tend to take when interpreting a situation.

In social work, experienced practitioners and managers can offer important peer support because they have encountered a wide range of situations. However, even experienced people are influenced by some situations more than others. For example, exposure to a bad experience such as a violent encounter with someone we worked with can make us more likely to think that it will happen again.

We judge situations by what we think is normal, however we can become used to a standard that others might think extreme. People with experience of unusual or extreme incidents can start to measure other incidents against these and to raise the threshold at which they become concerned. Serious case reviews show that people can look at incidents over time and become used to their severity without considering the picture that is building up of on-going harm. If something wasn't serious enough for intervention last week, then how can we say it is this week or next week?

We tend to overestimate the likelihood of something happening if it is particularly bad and underestimate the likelihood of something happening that is less dramatic. If a situation engages our primary emotions – fear, shame or guilt – then it is more vivid and more likely to influence us in the future. For example, if we are blamed for not preventing an older person from falling, we are likely to be more risk averse in the future.

Social workers can be role models of curiosity and encourage people to share their history and experiences. When these are in the open, we are less likely to leap to conclusions and we can broaden our minds by learning from others.

Our beliefs

One of the strengths of social work is its recognition that how we perform the role will be affected by our beliefs and what we think is important, and that, therefore, we need to be open about what these are. Recognising our own beliefs helps us to understand that other people hold different things to be important.

Our judgements are influenced by our beliefs. One way we do this is by using stereotyping as a shortcut to categorise people. This may be conscious or unconscious. In an emergency it can be useful to take a shortcut, particularly if we feel that there is danger. We would certainly tell ourselves that we should leave a home as soon as we feel threatened. However, stereotyping closes off our potential to get to know someone and to understand them as an individual. We may have to work hard with our colleagues to overcome our instinctive judgements or feelings about them.

We are more likely to accept someone's view if they are from a trusted group and more likely to dismiss information from someone we don't like. Again, we may need to work hard to properly weigh up what our staff tell us and not to have favourites.

Our belief systems are, by their nature, unprovable and illogical. However, we can understand and explain them to a certain extent, by thinking through our history and experience - what has happened to us and what we have been taught.

We need to start by being honest with ourselves about where our beliefs and values come from. We also need a place where we can be honest with others, as some of our biases and assumptions will be unconscious. Supervision and peer forums play an important part in this. Examining our beliefs and values can be uncomfortable. However, it allows us to have more rewarding relationships and to model the kind of practice that children, families and adults need.

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Exercise
Setting the vision and values for your team

- **To be helpful to children, adults and families, we need to be clear about where we are trying to get to and how we will behave (or won't behave) on the journey.**
- **Our vision says how we want things to be in the future.**
- **Our values say what matters to us as we work towards this future.**

In a group of people that you work with, identify a short (no more than a paragraph) statement for your vision.

In the future we want:

Then identify your values – how you will and won't behave.

We will:

We will not:

Conclusion

Understanding ourselves is essential to maintaining integrity. We have considered some of the factors that affect who we are and what we believe. We need to make sense of these, work with them, and increase our awareness.

Questions for reflection

What has happened to me in the past that has an effect on me now?

What are my beliefs about the people I work with?

Further reading

Kahneman D (2011) **Thinking, Fast and Slow**, Penguin

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

3a Busyness

Social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other related UN declarations on rights and the conventions derived from those declarations. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.1)

Busy

- actively or fully engaged; occupied
- crowded with or characterized by activity
- chiefly US and Canadian (of a room, telephone line, etc) in use; engaged
- overcrowded with detail
- meddlesome; inquisitive; prying

Perhaps related to Latin festīnāre to hurry

I had what I thought was a very important job. I rushed from place to place thinking that I had not time for lunch or to stop and talk to people. One day, a meeting was cancelled and I was able to finish on time – I rushed out of the office and cycled my bike into a car. I spent two months recovering, during which I had a lot of time to think. On reflection, I had cut out time with people and time thinking in favour of completing lots of tasks. I realised I hadn't been doing those tasks well. I needed to rebalance my time completely.

Being purposeful

It isn't how busy we are that matters, it's how effective we are. Being over-busy can cause us to make mistakes and increase our tendency to fall back on shortcuts that lead us down the wrong. A good analogy for the difference between being busy and actually achieving is the M25 motorway around London. It can be very busy at times with thousands and thousands of cars jammed onto it but none of the cars are getting round the road to their destination. There is a mythology in social work that people must be busy. However, the real goal is to be purposefully occupied. Busyness has a tendency to turn into habit or process. If we don't have much time then we can end up acting without thinking.

Over time, we hone the things that we do regularly so that we can act almost unconsciously. This can be helpful when time is short and we need to act quickly, or when things really are routine. However, we have a tendency to become overconfident in some areas. This can lead to us going through the motions, for example asking questions without really listening because we think we already know the answers. We can also rely

too much on the area that we enjoy and are good at. I like to write reports if something isn't working and Jo likes to jump in and do it herself. Neither of these can be the best thing to do in all situations.

Langer calls acting by habit using learned responses or routines 'mindlessness'. We need to ask ourselves: 'Where am I acting automatically? Where have I stopped questioning?' Social workers can demonstrate a willingness to break habits and to ask 'why do we do it like this?' If we remain open to new ideas and ways of working, then this will help children, families and adults to do the same.

Fitness

Thinking and being purposeful is tiring work and we need to be fit for it.

In some ways it is admirable that social workers are motivated to keep going even when they are tired, hungry or thirsty. However, we can see this from studies of what happens when junior doctors work long hours, without breaks, or without adequate rests between shifts. They cut corners, make mistakes, miss important checks and can even become less effective in their social relationships. We need to have enough food, water and sleep. This helps us to refocus and to concentrate on what we are doing.

More than this, social work is emotional work and it involves strong feelings. That means that we can't just attend to our physical needs we also need to attend to our emotional needs to avoid preoccupation.

This is one of the privileges of social work; that we have relationships which involve an emotional connection, not just an administrative task. However, these emotions do affect us and, at times, they can reverberate around the team like loud drums. Understanding our own emotions and our response to the emotions of others is an essential part of self-awareness. We need time to process emotions and manage these so that we can be ready for the next encounter that we face.

This is particularly true when we have other things going on in our lives. None of us can divorce our working world from our personal world. Sometimes we will need to be gentle with ourselves and others because there is already a lot to deal with.

Evidence continually points to colleagues and managers being the main sources of support in social work – not podcasts certainly! Being open about how we feel and regularly asking others what is going on for them means that when things are difficult we are more likely to be able to share and support each other. This doesn't mean oversharing all of the details of our personal lives. However, it does mean modelling awareness that we have a life outside of work and that we need to take the impact of this into account.

Some of the situations we face will resonate particularly with us. Reflection helps us to identify our emotional responses and recognise when our own feelings and experiences are preoccupying us.

Exercise
Being more purposeful

Thinking about our day. It is useful to know what sort of work we have to do and what we want to achieve from it.

At the start of the day (or last thing the day before if that works better for you), complete an outcomes list: what do I want to get finished today? **Be realistic!**

Put this in order of importance – what is most urgent and significant?
Put something in that you know you can easily achieve - it is important for our motivation to do something well each day if we can.
Add in some break times - this is time well spent and will make us more effective at other times.
Add in thinking time – this helps us to get in the right mindset before a task and to process afterwards.
Add in time for unexpected events.

Now there isn't time to do everything so take some things out.

We prefer some work to others and we also have times of the day when we prefer to different kinds of work. Re-order the work to make sure it reflects our preferences.

Conclusion

In social work the main tool that we have is ourself – we need to use ourselves well so that we can do good, sustainable work. We need to model balanced, thoughtful busy-ness to people who are in complex, often chaotic situations. We need to take care of our physical and emotional health so that we are in a position to adequately support children, families and adults. If we are preoccupied then people will pick up on that. Preoccupation damages relationships and makes us less able to do good work.

Questions for reflection

In which areas of my work have I stopped learning and experimenting?
What is keeping me busy – is it the right things?

Further reading

Munro E (2011) **Munro review of child protection: final report - a child-centred system,** Department for Education

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

4a Refection

Social workers should make judgements based on balanced and considered reasoning, maintaining awareness of the impact of their own values, prejudices and conflicts of interest on their practice and on other people. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.3.4)

Reflection -

1. The act of reflecting or the state of being reflected.

2. Something, such as light, radiant heat, sound, or an image, that is reflected.

3. a. Serious thinking or careful consideration

b. A thought or an opinion resulting from such thinking or consideration

from Late Latin reflexiō bending back

We can imagine a social worker as the captain of a boat that is sailing on a sea of emotions. In the boat, we gather the people we serve. To balance the boat, we need to make sense of the emotions we are encountering. We do this by using practice wisdom that comes from experience, values that we recognise in ourselves and – in the centre to give stability – our emotional wisdom. This is the wisdom that comes from tuning into the emotions of ourselves and others, and seeking to make sense of them. However, this boat only balances, it cannot move until we add the power of the sail. This is made up of our formal knowledge gleaned through learning, and our reasoning skills that we put into practice regularly. Equipped with these elements we can make progress for our passengers. These different elements are shown in the sailing model.

Model – Sailing using intuition and analysis

Analysis and intuition

We have two powerful mechanisms to draw on for our reasoning: analysis and intuition. We are rational and emotional beings, and we can use both of these to make sense of the world around us. Sometimes emotions are seen as unhelpful in social work because people confuse understanding emotions with being emotional. However, if you dismiss emotions then you limit your sources of information and your opportunity to understand what is happening. Both analysis and intuition can be used to overcome the inherent human weaknesses in reasoning that arise from our influences and biases.

Intuition is our instinctive grasp of the meaning of something. When facts are scarce or time is short, intuition helps us to complete the picture. It also helps us to empathise using our instinctive, human understanding. Intuition is also liable to be influenced by emotions and prior experience, and can result in us putting emphasis in the wrong place. Analysis is an intellectual exercise of breaking down what we know into its components, then weighing up and testing where each part came from and what it means. This helps not only to ensure that we have got the whole picture but also, crucially, to test out what the different elements mean and how significant they are.

We need to use analysis and intuition together. Our intuitive response gives us some clues through triggering emotions and memories of previous experiences, and making us alert to the responses of others. Our analytical reasoning then helps us to unpick this and to answer the question 'what does this mean?' We need to make sure that our intuition and our analysis are in balance. We also need to understand the balance between analysis and intuition in others. When someone is ignoring or minimising either their emotions or their reasoning, we need to patiently draw out this part of them, and encourage them to exercise this part of themselves.

Critical reflection

We come to understand ourselves through thinking effectively about our experiences. Kolb describes how, through critical reflection, we can turn our experiences into learning that we can use in the future. Reflection can take place as we go along; and often does because we are busy. Reflection in action helps us to quickly process what is happening and constantly monitor our behaviour, as if we were a helicopter hovering over ourselves. However, we also need to reflect on action. We need to stop and think carefully and in a structured way. This allows us to consider the meaning of an experience without the heat of the immediate emotions, and then to plan what to do next. In this way we can learn and be more prepared for the next thing that comes along.

Critical reflection enables us to become aware of what we think and why, to question it and to explain it to others. Working through our experiences, our responses to them and our understanding of them enables us to act thoughtfully, and to overcome some of the influences and biases that we carry with us. Without critical reflection, we may simply lurch from one action to another.

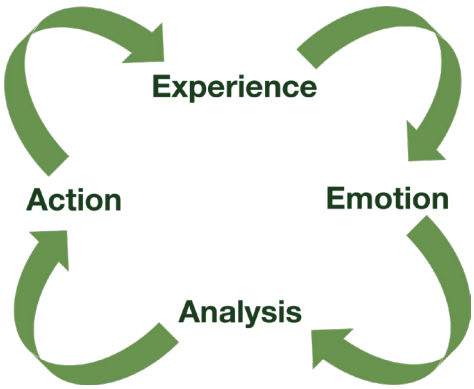
"Critical reflection also allows us to process and recover from the barrage of information that we have absorbed, in the same way that a rest day allows an athlete to recover from constant training".

Social work is inherently uncertain because it deals with people. We need to be prepared to respond to uncertainty. We cannot do this by creating a rule for every situation because we will soon come up against something we haven't thought of. Instead, we need to learn from our experience and constantly use that learning to respond to what is new. This work requires courage, as well as encouragement both to help us cope with what we know and with what we don't know. Good critical reflection highlights the things we have got wrong and the chances we have missed but it also shows up the good that we do. We have to turn all of these things into learning that will benefit ourselves, our staff and the people we serve.

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Exercise
Using the reflective cycle

Think about a recent event or situation that involved a member of staff. It may be that they said or did something, or behaved in a way that you didn't expect. Take each point of the reflective cycle in turn so that you can learn from what happened.



Experience – what happened: before; during; and after the event or situation?

Emotion – how did you feel and how did the member of staff feel at the time; how do you feel now?

Analysis – what did this event or situation mean to you and to the member of staff; what did it remind you of and what was unusual about it?

Action – what do you need to do in order to understand your role and the member of staff's role in the event or situation; how can you make progress; how can you use what you have learnt with others?

(Based on RiPfA 2013 from Kolb 1984)

Conclusion

We need to practice critical reflection, to maintain our integrity. This work requires courage, as well as encouragement both to help us cope with what we know and with what we don't know. Social workers can model this courage to children, adults and families that we work with so that we can build understanding and act together to change lives.

Questions for reflection

Do I use intuition or analysis more in a crisis?

When do I make time to recover and learn from my experiences?

Further reading

Taylor B (2010) **Professional Decision Making in Social Work Practice,** Learning Matters

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

5a Environment

BASW expects employers to have in place systems and approaches to promote a climate which supports, monitors, reviews and takes the necessary action to ensure social workers can comply with the Code of Ethics and other requirements to deliver safe and effective practice. (BASW Code of Ethics 3)

Environment

1. external conditions or surroundings, esp those in which people live or work
2. (Biology) ecology the external surroundings in which a plant or animal lives, which tend to influence its development and behaviour
3. the state of being environed; encirclement

from the Old French envir meaning to circle around

I was in the office one day when I went into the kitchen. While I was waiting for the kettle to boil I saw, really for the first time, all the posters and notes that were on the walls: 'wash up, turn the taps off, don't take my milk, keep the kitchen tidy.' Lots of orders, written on scrappy paper, stuck to the walls in uneven lines.

The next day I went into the kitchen and took all of those notices down. I cleaned the blue tac off the wall and I put up one poster, Van Gogh's sunflowers.

We deserved something beautiful to look at while we waited for the kettle to boil.

Complexity

Social work is with people and people live in complex systems. There are many unpredictable events and so our working environments are arranged to be able to deal with these through elements like duty teams, rapid communications and quick response services. This gives us flexibility and responsiveness, since in a complex environment we need to be able to act, see how this is going and then change as needed. However, the unpredictability can become overemphasised and influence our working lives too much. We may be constantly poised for the next crisis and find that the elements of the environment that we need to have in order to work calmly, such as space for recording and quiet areas for conversations, get squeezed out.

Individuals, teams and leaders can get caught up in the drama of social work. You see this in teams where an unexpected event occurs or an unusual referral is made and everyone gets drawn into the response. We can also get drawn into the emotion, for example crying along with a colleague rather than helping them to step back so they are able to use their critical thinking. This is partly because of our concern and also, possibly, our natural human curiosity. The effort to help out can be counter-productive if it is not focused.

When we talk to managers and practitioners about their working environment, they mention interruptions as a major problem. Interruptions stop them from working steadily at a task, such as completing an assessment. However, when we then ask who interrupts them, they reply ‘we interrupt each other.’

Some of the unpredictability of social work will always remain and this helps to make the work interesting. However, we do have some control and some influence over how we manage our work. We can arrange for there to be uninterrupted time if we negotiate with others and if we are careful to differentiate between what is urgent and what is not.

One of the ways in which we can reduce the sense of crisis is to be mindful about the language we use. In social work, some of the common language relates to dramatic places such as the battlefield, for example front-line, siege, bombarded. Although we may not be able to control what comes into our environment, we can control how we respond to it and use different language. The language of a survivor does not seem to leave a lot of space for the language of resilience. Crisis comes from the word for decision. It is a moment of opportunity and we can talk positively about situations that require our attention, for example referring to them as a chance to make progress in the relationship or in our intervention.

Social work is constantly changing. This allows it to evolve and respond to new social and individual experiences. It also brings with it uncertainty and anxiety. Managers can model a reflective response to change by avoiding jumping into the question ‘what should I do?’ Instead, we can ask the question ‘what is happening?’ This allows us to explore the situation and make a judgement based on our understanding rather than just our instinct.

Places

Our environment needs to be functional. It could also be beautiful, though it usually is not. We partly agree with Healy and Meagher who hypothesise that this may be because we are used to working with people in disadvantage and so we underestimate the impact of the environment. Our view is that order in the environment can help us to reflect and to think clearly. Also that beauty can help to inspire us and motivate us. Social workers, like all people, want to be recognised and valued for the work they do. Working in light, bright, beautiful environments indicates that the work we do is important. This is something we can start to create for ourselves.

The modern trend is towards shared offices, hot desking and agile working. These can be viewed positively or negatively – as an opportunity for flexibility and a chance to engage with others, or as an isolating experience. We hear from practitioners that agile working reduces their sense of being part of a team, and from managers that it can make it difficult for them to respond to their staff.

The Social Work Task Force in 2009, and other research before and since, identified that social workers need peer and managerial support. When opportunities to be in the same place are limited by agile working, we need to create others, for example through team meetings or peer forums. We do also need to be aware that regular interaction with the same people can lead to group think – when we adapt our thinking to the reactions that we expect from colleagues. It is, therefore, helpful to seek out opportunities to learn from other teams, professions and agencies. Agile working can be a way of doing this.

Agile working may not offer us the safe, quiet spaces that we need for reflection. Ferguson describes how social work is dynamic and full of movement, so it is important to slow things down and be still sometimes, in supervision, alone or with peers. When individual desks are not assigned, then managers can help to ensure that there are other spaces where people feel able to reflect.

Exercise
Control and influence

One way to feel more in control is to separate out the things that we can change and influence from the things that we can't. Worrying about things we don't have control over can make us feel more helpless, whereas acting to change what we can increases resilience.

Take any problem, for example workload, and make three lists:

- What is in my control?
- What I can influence?
- What is outside my control?

For example, you may not be able to change the amount of work there is, but you have some control over your diary and you may be able to influence when you are allocated cases.

Focus on doing the things that are in your control and influence, and try not to worry about what is outside of your control.

Conclusion

Our environment affects us physically, psychologically and socially. Consider any eco system, for example a fish tank. This is a contained environment that when in balance can meet all the needs of the fish who live there and enable them to thrive. As long as you attend to the environment the fish will do well. The problems come when the environment overwhelms the fish.

Social work takes place in difficult work environments but there is a lot we can do to influence and improve them. The challenge is to take care of ourselves in our environment so that we can work with integrity.

Children, adults and families that we work with need us to be effective. They need to see how possible it is to positively influence the environment around us. We need to take optimism about the control and influence we can have on our surroundings out to the homes we visit.

Questions for reflection

What language do I use to describe our working environment?

What does my office say about me?

Further reading

Social Work Task Force (2009) **Building a safe, confident future - The final report of the Social Work Task Force**, Department for Children, Schools and Families

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

6a Workload

Social workers should respect, uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being. They should work towards promoting the best interests of individuals and groups in society and the avoidance of harm. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.1.1.)

Work

1a. Physical or mental effort or activity directed toward the production or accomplishment of something:

1b. Such effort or activity by which one makes a living; employment

1c. A trade, profession, or other means of livelihood:

[Old English weorc (n), wircan, wyrcan (vb); related to Old High German wurchen, German wirken, Old Norse yrkja, Gothic waurkjan]

When I was a relatively new social worker, I prided myself on how quickly I could get things done and how many cases I could take. I looked at my more experienced (and wiser) colleagues and thought that they moved too slowly, taking too much time to find out about someone before a visit and to sit with them in conversation.

It took a while for me to realise that, while I was meeting targets, I was missing the point of social work.

Workflow

Parkinson's law states that work expands to fit the time and space available. Our environment is one of copious and never-ending work. One of the important capabilities in social work is organising our work, both for ourselves and as a model to children, families and adults.

Much of the work is complex and comes in unpredictably. Although variety of work can be motivating, the demand-control model of work shows that there needs to be a balance between the demands placed on people and the scope they have to manage their work. The Health and Safety Executive have shown that people can thrive on high volumes of work, provided that they have clarity over what is expected of them and autonomy to achieve it. Managers can support this balance by helping people to control their workflow and their work planning. There have been many attempts to create a perfect workload management tool. However, research by the Social Work Task Force showed that the judgement of managers remains the essential element in supporting staff to have appropriate workloads.

It is important that staff and supervisors create good information about the activities that staff are undertaking. Workload isn't just practice, it includes learning and development, support for others, and input to organisational change. The organisational context affects how much there is for people to process. Practice work varies greatly based on its complexity and risk, as well as factors like travel.

It is important that there is flexibility to respond to changes in demand. Decisions about workload should be shared and this requires trusted, knowledgeable supervisors. Although tools can help with judging workload, professional judgement is most helpful. Workload needs regular review and supervision is a good place for this.

Systems

Systems and targets aim to give structure to our environment by managing the workflow through it. They can help us to work in ways that enhance us or in ways that undermine us.

Standardising systems and automating elements of them often saves time and effort. It can make it easier for us to find, use and share information. Systems help us to collate, analyse and learn about the factors that support good practice and the factors that undermine it.

However, systems that we devise cannot truly reflect the complexity of people's lives and the range of pathways that they follow. If we blindly follow systems and processes, then we are not acting with integrity. We need to be open to changing our process when we encounter something new. That is how practice evolves. Managers can help staff to understand why they are being asked to follow a system and advocate when the system does not support good practice. It is not sufficient to say to a child 'it's the system.' We have more power than the people we work with and so we must explain our actions to them and ask on their behalf for the changes that are needed.

Targets have become increasingly important in social work. Again, targets are a means to an end, helping us to aim for the right kind of things and keep track of progress. They can help us to avoid drift and work to the pace that children, families and adults need. There are some difficulties with targets, though. It is easier to measure quantity than quality, and so we can become focused on outputs (how much we do), rather than outcomes (what difference we make). Munro, who has linked extensively at what causes people to work without thinking, points out that following targets and timescales can result in us using our judgement less and thinking we are having impact when we are not. She describes this as 'hitting the target and missing the point.'

Collecting information takes time and it affects morale if people do not think that it is worthwhile. In one role, one of us had to record reviews for people who had died to meet the review target. This kind of practice undermines our feeling of purpose. Managers are in a position to suggest targets that help children, families and adults, and to challenge collection of data that does not support good practice.

Exercise
discussing workload in supervision

The discussion should be based on some principles:

- Individualised allocation of time is essential for effective workload management
- We have to recognise that unexpected emergencies are daily occurrences in social work
- Both workload management and supervision have to involve trust between worker and supervisor.

Supervisor and member of staff meet once every six weeks for a workload management session. Time learning and development, and organisational input is put into the worker's days for the next six weeks. The worker brings a list of cases and the tasks she thinks she will need to do. These tasks are discussed and agreement reached. The time is then roughly allocated (based on quarter or half days).

As a general rule a surplus or deficit of half a day (for full time workers) is not significant. A bigger surplus indicates space to take on more work; and a deficit means that they will have to agree what might be prioritised, what might be carried over until the next session, or whether the workload is excessive and requires reduction:

- If there is a change then the worker can reprioritise or raise an issue
- If new work then the manager and worker reprioritise
- If less work then the worker asks for more.

(based on BASW and Unison Scotland 2010)

Conclusion

To be useful, we must keep in mind the purpose of our actions. This should always be to help children, families and adults. We need to ask ourselves: 'how is this helping us to make a difference?' We should always be able to relate a task back to improving someone's life.

Questions for reflection

How do I keep my focus on the outcomes for children, adults and families?

Are the things I do meaningful for children, adults and families?

Further reading

Munro E (2008) The impact of audit on social work practice, **British Journal of Social Work,** 34, 1075-95

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

7a Work Relationships

Social workers should engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers to share knowledge and take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.15)

Relationship

1. The condition or fact of being related; connection or association.
2. Connection by blood or marriage; kinship.
3. A particular type of connection existing between people related to or having dealings with each other

from the Latin relatio meaning a narration or story

When I think about the colleagues that I have worked with, the ones that stand out to me are the ones who were unafraid to challenge me. But they did it in a really helpful way. They took time over my work. So when I gave them something, they looked at it and tried to teach me how to do it better.

One man, when I was working in a legal system, he kept sending me back affadavits covered in red pen. And I would fix them and they would come back again. In the end I just walked in and said 'why don't you just write this yourself, it would be faster.' And he said 'I know, and I have been tempted, but I have faith in you so I will keep sending it back.' He wanted to invest in me.

Colleagues

We get more out of our work relationships if we demonstrate a positive expectations approach – expecting a good story rather than one that ends badly.

This starts with the premise that everyone wants to do a good job. If someone is being unhelpful or inconsiderate, then we need to find out why. This may be because they are not aware of our needs or it may be because they are not in a position to act differently. Either way, by adopting the view that if we help them to understand the impact on us then we can develop our relationship, we can have a positive conversation about what we each need. This conversation allows exploration of the reasons why we aren't working effectively together and any changes to how we work are agreed. The positive expectations approach enables us to support each other to perform well. It ensures that we are careful about each other's self-esteem and avoid blame.

Our relationships now are affected by our relationship history. If we have had a difficult relationship with a colleague or supervisor in the past, we can bring that to the new situation. On the positive side, we also apply learning about what works, and we can be motivated to avoid doing the things that have impacted badly on us when others did them. Having open conversations about how well relationships are working is helpful on an individual and group level.

We do need to be aware of power within those relationships. A supervisor can open a discussion about the supervisory relationship and model willingness to listen and change, which then helps the supervisee to have confidence in saying what they think. Leadership from managers is particularly important for minority groups in the workforce who can face particular barriers in asking what they need from relationships. It is important that supervisors are comfortable with difference and build relationships that encompass difference. The way these work should be based on what different people need rather than on treating everyone the same. We also need to take into account the impact on people of how others treat them.

We need to respect and support our colleagues and be prepared to seek support from them. Recognition of what we each offer lays the foundation for this behaviour.

Groups

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The Social Work Task Force highlighted that people work better when they feel valued and respected in their work. There has also been research that indicates that relationships thrive when people are able to reciprocate. We need to respect and support our colleagues and be prepared to seek support from them. Recognition of what we each offer lays the foundation for this behaviour.

Managers can support diversity and set the tone for acceptance. This includes ensuring issues are clear, the aim is shared, the right size of group is present, that everyone has authority and capability, and that there is someone to chair. Group supervision is one way of practicing this. Managers need to be careful that genuine and open discussion

isn't shut down by a powerful person (possibly themselves) taking the lead, or by an unwillingness to challenge. We can become anxious if there isn't quick agreement and dissenting voices get drowned out. As with our relationships with the people we serve, we need to be prepared to hold uncertainty and hear other people's voices until reliable meaning emerges.

Exercise
De Bono's hats

Within a group, there are particular roles that we tend to fall into either because of our preferences or because of the preferences of others. De Bono described six roles:

- **managing** – thinking about the goal and big picture
- **informational** – bringing evidence and facts
- **emotional** – bringing intuition
- **logical** – identifying practical issues and bringing realism
- **optimistic** – seeking harmony and looking on the bright side
- **and creative** – thinking outside the box

He suggested that we can try playing different roles to broaden our perspectives and approaches. This can make us feel insecure so is best done with support.

In a group you can allocate or choose different hats for people and each person then discusses an issue from that perspective.

It can be helpful to have someone who is usually comfortable in one role playing a different role, e.g. a logical person being more creative.

You can use this for a genuine issue or practice with a question like 'should we all use unicycles at work? To get people to think about the different points of view.

Sometimes it is useful to add a seventh person who acts as a facilitator and makes sure everyone speaks.

It can also be helpful to have the six thinking styles somewhere as a reference to remind us to think outside of our usual comfort zone.

Conclusion

Social work only works through relationships that build collaboration. We need to build relationships with our colleagues so that we have the support we need to do this demanding work with hope and with passion. Children, adults and families that we work with need us to be available to them. We cannot use them for our emotional support. We can show people strong, supportive, enhancing relationships. We can model relationships that enhance our integrity – our motivation, our wellbeing and our ability to use ourselves.

Questions for reflection

How does power affect my relationships?

Where is the helpful dissent?

Further reading

Surowiecki J (2004) **The wisdom of crowds**, Abacus

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

8a Support

Social workers should contribute to the education and training of colleagues and students by sharing knowledge and practice wisdom. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.16)

Support

- To bear the weight of, especially from below; keep from falling, sinking, or slipping
- To keep from weakening or failing; give confidence or comfort to
- To provide for or maintain by supplying with money or necessities

From the Latin supportāre, to carry

I was very lucky for many years to have a manager who was great at containing me. There were times when I really needed to sound off so I could manage how I was going to go on in a more thoughtful way. My manager used to say to me, before you call anyone or speak and regret it, send me an email with everything that is bothering you. And I would send it to him and he would send it back with a response saying 'read, noted, deleted.' So he didn't feed into it, he deleted it so I felt safe, and it took all the heat out of it. For me this was very containing.

Containment

Emotional intelligence provides the foundation for good support. It involves paying attention to how we and others feel. Goleman identifies that this allows us to motivate ourselves and persist in the face of frustrations; control impulses and delay gratification; regulate our moods and keep distress from swamping our ability to think; empathise with others and remain hopeful. In close working environments with a lot of uncertainty, we will catch emotions and experience the secondary trauma of witnessing people's distress. However, we can learn to recognise this, acknowledge it and use emotional intelligence to manage it. Emotional intelligence is an essential capability in social work because the work is done through relationships. Howe argues that when we try to do tasks without emotional intelligence then we make superficial responses that follow procedures but do not engage with people. People experience this as unfeeling and the responses become ineffective. We then become disillusioned about our ability to make a difference and our resilience is undermined. In our teams and services, we need to practice authentic responses to our colleagues that use emotional intelligence. This helps us to build relationships and to manage difficult emotions well, and allows us to seek help when we need it.

There are a lot of emotions flying around in any team or organisation that works with people who are having a tough time. Resonance and dissonance is used to describe the idea of the contagious nature of emotions. Contagion occurs through a process of mirroring in which emotions spread amongst people who are in proximity to each other, leading to not only a sharing of mood, but also to an alignment of body posture and also heart rates. Friedman and Riggio suggest that the person who is most emotionally expressive transmits their mood to those around. Resonance occurs when two people's moods align around positive feelings. In contrast, dissonance occurs when one person is out of touch with the feelings of another, putting that person off-balance and on-guard. Morrison argues that resonance is part of what makes work meaningful, whereas dissonance leads to defensive pre-occupation, inefficiency and poor decision making.

We need to seek help with our emotions because they impact on our functioning and they are contagious. Help seeking involves being able to identify problems that are impacting on our own performance and well-being, assess what part we are playing in the difficulties and develop strategies and solutions. It also demands that we are able to recognise when the problem is not ours alone to solve. Bringing problems to others for support and critical questioning requires intellectual and emotional rigor. It also requires trust and confidence in the person from whom the help is being sought. Managers need to make it clear that it is normal to experience referred emotions in this work and that it is right to acknowledge and work through these together. Without this, people can continue to experience secondary trauma and emotions can become destructive.

Support

Good support for colleagues is not the same as parenting or nurturing. It is an adult to adult relationship that is both helpful and empowering. Authoritative support doesn't placate or collude or ignore but instead is based on exchanging expertise so that both parties can grow. It requires regular open discussion about how each party is performing, how they can develop and the support that they need. It doesn't deny power imbalances but works with this. This approach requires both parties to be open about their skills, knowledge, experience and values. Through questions, reflection, sharing, learning and collaborating, adults can develop their practice. Climbing a ladder is an analogy for this support. If we are climbing a ladder we need someone to hold the ladder firmly and do that well, offering advice and reassurance when needed. We don't need someone failing to watch the ladder, holding it with one hand while doing something else or impeding by climbing right behind us.

Good support encompasses formal and informal approaches, and is delivered through formal and informal mechanisms. These include team meetings, making tea, making jokes, supervision and helping out. Some important elements of peer support are: having a sense of community, caring for the shared environment, learning together, doing things together, and being generous to each other. The key concepts here are about encouraging each other to value the workplace and to feel connected and valued. This is about having time for colleagues and peers that is enriching to all.

"Generosity at work can look like washing someone's cup, taking time to find out how someone is or bringing in treats".

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Exercise
Asking for help

Every day, a range of new tasks come to us. Some of these will be more comfortable to do than others.

Firstly, you need to understand your motivational response to new tasks as this will affect your ability to undertake them. This will be affected by three main issues:

1. is this something you like doing
2. is it something you are good at,
3. is it something you will be checked up on?

If it is none of those, then you will need to search hard for motivation.

Secondly, you need to understand the games you may play to avoid doing the things you are less comfortable with: filling time up with trivial tasks like non-urgent emails, flicking between tasks, over planning, talking rather than acting, gathering more and more information, doing someone else's job, jumping into a crisis that you are not needed for, making a snap decision to 'get it done'.

If you have low motivation and/ or you are avoiding a task, then you probably need help. This might be practical help or it might be emotional help. What would break the deadlock for you? Then think about who will help you with it – this could be someone who has skill or knowledge that you need to help you practically, or it might be someone who has experience to help you emotionally.

Then you need to ask them for help. Successful help seeking starts with being clear about the outcome you want. Pick your moment to ask the person and make sure you are clear about what you need and why. Think about the likely impact on them; is there something you can offer them to minimise the impact? Don't forget to thank them afterwards.

Conclusion

People who need social work need us to be supported so that we can be effective. If we are preoccupied that than makes us unavailable and ultimately ineffectual. How we are with colleagues, including those who are more powerful or less powerful than us, influences how we are with children, adults and families. We need to see our colleagues as part of our practice, and see ourselves as part of theirs.

Good peers and managers make social work possible and add to its enjoyment. We can develop and become more capable within secure and positive relationships. This is what we want to demonstrate to children, adults and families. We work with often vulnerable people who have seen dysfunctional adult behaviour all around them where people cannot model successful, authentic relationships. We need to show them something different.

Questions for reflection

How do I ensure adult to adult relationships at work?

How do I show my care for others?

Further reading

Goleman D (1996) **Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ**, Bloomsbury

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

9a Discovery

Social workers should be prepared to challenge discriminatory, ineffective and unjust policies, procedures and practice. They should challenge the abuse of power and the exclusion of people from decisions that affect them. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.8)

Discovery

1. The act or an instance of discovering.
2. Something discovered.

From Middle English discoveren, to reveal,

When I started out in social work, my team manager said 'you'll be fine.' She gave me supervision that included a standing item on anti-oppressive practice – including any experience I had had of oppression and any oppression I had been part of. I made a huge mistake quite early on in my career and she was with me while her boss told me I would need to be monitored on a weekly basis. Then she sat with me and unpicked why I had acted in the way I had and what I could learn from this. She taught me that I mustn't be anxious about making mistakes. Everyone carries around failures if they work long enough. The questions are: how do you seek support and help so that you don't make avoidable mistakes, and how do you carry unavoidable mistakes with you without being overwhelmed? How do you use your mistakes to improve?

Questioning

Part of having integrity is being prepared to challenge things that we are not sure about or that concern us. This is part of the support we provide to our colleagues. Challenge is a difficult word as it has negative implications. We prefer the word discovery as what we are trying to do with challenge is to increase our and others' knowledge and ability to act effectively. There is a spectrum to this ranging from questioning, through remonstration to whistleblowing. How we try to discover will depend on the reaction of people around us. Challenge can be seen as negative and disloyal, and it can be difficult and lonely. However, as we build expectations of constructive challenge as the norm, it gets easier and more positive.

Being curious and asking questions of everyone and at all times is a good beginning. Our own integrity and our adult relationships support us in this. If we regularly provide feedback on each other's work – positive and negative aspects, then it is easier to raise new issues. Managers model this in the team and in individual supervision.

Challenging others when we think they are not serving clients well is stressful. Any challenge must be legitimate, clear and consistent. Fairness includes involving the person, treating people in the same way, striving to avoid personal bias, being accurate and being open to correction. Above all we have to respect other people's dignity. We should be aware that we may be part of the problem. As with social work, we need to consider both people's behaviour and the context that they are in.

It is helpful to use the reflective cycle to consider how people are performing in terms of experience, reflection, analysis and planning. Generally, people gravitate towards what they like to do and what they are good at. This may lead them to neglect an area of the cycle, for example continuously acting without reflection. They may also get stuck if they have a particularly strong response to one element of the cycle, for example reliving emotion without being able to analyse what it means. Supervisors and mentors can support people to get on with their practice through increasing their awareness, improving the quality of their analysis, and improving the quality of their planning and action.

If we notice something that someone isn't aware that they are doing or not doing, then we need to be prepared for surprise and probably hostility. Peers, mentors and supervisors can help us to identify our blind spots so it is important to open ourselves up to this for our own learning and also as a model for how we want others to respond.

Bullying is a particularly difficult area to challenge because of the impact on us of the bullying and because of the painful emotions that can be involved. Bullying is often repeated and can be done by individuals or by groups. Whistleblowing is needed if the culture doesn't allow us to challenge effectively. This is more likely in a bullying culture as bullies tend to isolate people and cause fear. If you need to challenge in that kind of culture, then if possible you should seek some personal support.

Communities of practice

Communities of practice, identified by Wenger, are a helpful model of positive, purposeful support. A community of practice is an informal group that people form to achieve a shared purpose – something that they are trying to do. The community may be a group with the same role or location, however it can be much wider than this.

"Communities of practice are supported by a shared goal and an awareness of how being part of the community can help them to achieve their goal".

Members of the community produce knowledge about how to meet their goal as they undertake activities. Through opportunities to discuss, reflect, share and learn, they produce a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools and ways of working. These make up a practice that all can draw on. For example, a group of social workers come together to talk about a particular case and identify a checklist to help them with future cases. This artefact then is used to inform future engagement.

Being part of the community is not just an intellectual matter, it is also an emotional sense of belonging. Communities of practice have permeable boundaries and benefit from new people and from exchanging knowledge across the borders, as social work does with psychology. Strong communities foster relationships of respect and trust, which encourage people to share and question each other. The community can be enhanced

by members creating opportunities to welcome others, to meet and share, and to develop practice. It is also enhanced through having an accessible repository of learning. A range of activities and resources helps to draw on different strengths and support different preferences. Newcomers gradually participate and become part of the community. Colleagues who are isolated or work at a distance or in a different professional culture can be brought in.

We need opportunities to talk with people who understand what we do and what we experience. Communities of practice also offer us relationships that give us the trust and confidence to challenge and conflict with others. If we think about our personal lives, one of the marks of a good relationship is often the ability to fall out and make up. If we don't feel able to do this with colleagues, then we will struggle to constructively challenge and support children, adults and families.

Communities of practice are voluntary and grow from the inside. However facilitators, often with a leadership or mentoring role, act as catalysts for this. They can create time and space for people to meet, broker relationships to share learning and arrange activities. They can also help to ensure that the community doesn't exclude people. This work is similar to the work that is undertaken in supervision and mentoring. Social workers are ideally placed to act in this way and to encourage people to come together to share their expertise and to develop.

Exercise
Giving feedback

When you are giving feedback to someone you need to follow a few steps before talking to the member of staff:

- **Firstly,** establish what is happening – how is the person behaving and what evidence do you have of this;
- **Secondly,** understand your role in the situation – how are you impacting on the behaviour;
- **Thirdly,** seek support to ensure that it is appropriate for you to raise the issue and that you have a sound plan for how to do this.

When you are confident that there is an issue and that you should be raising it, you need to arrange to speak to the person. The interview that you have can be described as a bridging interview because you are trying to bridge a gap between expectations and what is happening in practice.

You should expect to learn about the interviewee and their context in this interview. If you do not learn anything then it is unlikely that much has been achieved.

The bridging interview requires follow up. It is not a one off event. If the circumstances are serious enough to warrant the interview then whatever you agree needs monitoring, reinforcing and reviewing.

The bridging interview should take the following form:

1	**Explain your concerns** – what you would expect, what has been happening, the evidence you have for this
2	**Ask the interviewee for their view** – what they think has been happening
3	**Establish the gap** – you may have been mistaken or there may be a definite need for practice improvement
4	**Explore and understand the gap** – find out why the gap has occurred, what is due to the person, what to the role and what to the support
5	**Eliminate the gap** – agree what needs to happen in order to close the gap between what is expected and what is happening.

This may take some time and you may need to come back to the discussion. The person may react strongly. They may need additional support and so might you.

Conclusion

Social work only works through relationships that build collaboration. This starts with how we relate to our colleagues and managers take a lead in modelling this. We need to build relationships with our colleagues so that we have the support we need to do this demanding work with hope and with passion.

Questions for reflection

Am I curious about learning from my colleagues?

How do I challenge the abuse of power?

Further reading

Wenger E (1998) **Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity,** Cambridge University Press

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 1

10a Uncertainty

Social workers should use professional knowledge and experience to engage in research and to contribute to the development of ethically based policy and programmes. They should analyse and evaluate the quality and outcomes of their practice with people who use social work services. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.17)

Certain

1. Definite; fixed
2. Sure to come or happen; inevitable
3. Established beyond doubt or question; indisputable
4. Capable of being relied on; dependable
5. Having or showing confidence; assured

When I was a team manager, we lost sight of a person who was on the waiting list and so nobody went out to see her. One day I had a call. Her friend rang to berate me (rightly) because she had fallen and had been without help for a long time. If we had seen her and arranged regular support, this wouldn't have happened.

I felt truly guilty. I rang my manager. He said, let's first of all think of what we can do for this woman and the people who care about her. Then let's find out how this happened and how we can do better. He was interested in care and accountability, not blame.

Response to uncertainty

Social work is uncertain. We can control how we respond and we can influence how the organisation works in uncertainty. The organisational response to uncertainty also strongly influences us.

Organisations that provide social work are working with unclear outcomes and consequences all of the time. Our natural instinct is to try to control what happens and so we build up systems and processes to help us do this. Snowden developed the cynefin framework to show that we need to work in different ways depending on the kind of environment we work in.

- In a tightly constrained environment, we can easily categorise things that happen and respond using processes.
- When things are complicated and a lot is going on, we need to use more analysis and then respond.
- In complex environments, the situation is not clear so we need to probe and then work out what is happening before responding.
- In chaotic environments we need to act and then see what happens and work out what the impact has been.

Social care usually takes place in a complex environment where we need to explore and develop new practice. However, we often treat it as though it was just complicated and we ought to be able to logically work out the answer. We can also treat it as if was complex though evidence points to a number of predictable factors. This can lead to us feeling like we should be in control or that we have no control at all. In reality we are somewhere in between.

When things go wrong, we often seek more certainty and put in more processes and information. This would help if it was just that we missed one of the elements in a complicated picture, however it doesn't solve things when the picture is complex and constantly changing. We can use short cuts from process and good practice, however we always need to be alive to what is different and we cannot expect to pick the 'right answer'. Instead we need to test, analyse and then try out what is likely to work adjusting as we go. We can also treat it as if was complex though evidence points to a number of predictable factors.

There is no room in social care for action without thinking. Our organisations must be supportive and engaged with our work, constantly reflecting and learning from what we do. Leaders, including social work managers, need to model thoughtful, flexible approaches.

Ayre and Preston-Shoot say that social work organisations need to analyse at level three. Level one analysis takes the problem and reformulates it as an instruction: 'this child was injured because we did not do X' followed by a recommendation stating that 'we must do X in the future'. Level two analysis takes a more procedural approach – the problem is addressed by suggesting change to, or emphasis on, approved processes for managing the issue in question. For example we should write more procedures, provide more training, create more records or audit more. This approach assumes failure has arisen because of a lack of knowledge or guidance to support the worker to do the essential task. However it does not explain the numerous cases where the processes and training were in place and the key participants failed to take practice action that they would have understood in principle were the right things to do. Level three analysis is a systemic approach. It seeks out the answer to the question 'why, then, despite adequate training and guidance, do we still fail to take the action required?' This level of analysis looks beyond personal failure. It seeks out and describes the fundamental organisational and relational factors that make it more or less possible to make good decisions.

Social work organisations are open systems. Each part provides feedback that helps the system to remain in balance despite uncertainty. Within the system, we need to use reflection and reflexivity – an awareness of our own influence and impact – to help us make the organisation work as well as possible. Similarly, we need to consider carefully how any changes we make will influence the system. Organisations cannot prescribe what to do in every situation. Instead they need to put in place the conditions that allow people to learn, experiment, reflect and improve. This requires support and trust.

Functional organisations

Functional organisations allow the people in them to cope with uncertainty. Social work organisations are dysfunctional if they pretend something is simple when it isn't or that you can be certain when you can't. In contrast, a functional organisation recognises that each new experience or situation is going to cause uncertainty and therefore anxiety. From top to bottom in that organisation, the ethos is to accept uncertainty and anxiety as part of the job. People say 'I am not sure what to do, I need to consider this.' Because of this acceptance, it is possible to diffuse the anxiety and to reflect. People encourage each other to try things out, to persist, to gain insight and to reach a resolution.

Without an environment where it is possible to acknowledge uncertainty, the anxiety remains. People revert to the fight or flight reflex and respond inappropriately. When things remain unresolved they start to pretend that the situation doesn't exist and that they are powerless to act. Gradually, they recruit others to join them in this lonely, disengaged place.

Within most organisations there are pockets of inspiring functional behaviour and some dysfunctional black holes. The people that admit to and accept uncertainty need to join up. In uncertainty, however capable we are, we will have good and bad days. There will be times when we feel out of control and need to admit our anxiety. Otherwise we will seize on an answer to reduce the anxiety and we will be lucky if it is the right one.

Resilient organisations, like resilient people, have characteristics of self-efficacy and optimism. They exhibit trust and support, as well as curiosity and appropriate challenge. Resilient organisations look outwards because they have confidence in their purpose and integrity, so are prepared to look to others to learn from. Resilient organisations are prepared to change when the facts change. This happens through involving people and being open to their input.

In social care a combination of difficult context, high-profile failure and sudden demand could destabilise an organisation. Healthy organisations are able to keep their eye on the bottom line during these times of turbulence. The bottom line in social care is about being helpful to children, families and adults who need support. This requires a work force that is relational, active, supportive, empathetic and authoritative enough to make a difference. Functional organisations remain supportive of their staff even when and especially when they are under pressure. Ferguson writes that the quality of attention that workers can give to children is directly related to the support they themselves receive. Resilient organisations are curious about how they are doing and constantly look forward to consider what might happen and how it can be an opportunity.

At any level we can set an example. We can keep focused on the purpose of our work. We can say when we are anxious and are not sure what to do. We can ask 'what else might be happening?' We can look outwards to build partnerships. Above all, we can offer a secure functional environment for staff that is open to doubt, offers support, celebrates success, and remains optimistic about what is possible.

Exercise
Simple, complicated, complex, chaotic

Look at the typical areas of your team's work.

What elements fit into different types of work?

Simple We can see the cause and effect Make sure you know what the process is for these areas	**Complicated** We can figure this out if we analyse things Understand what information you use to analyse these areas
Complex We need to try things out and evaluate Consider what support you need for these areas	**Chaotic** Truly unexpected events Consider how you will contain immediate risk and start to treat these as complex

Conclusion

People who need social work can experience organisations as impenetrable, impersonal, inflexible entities. If we are not careful, we can add to their complex and sometimes chaotic situations. However, if we recognise that uncertainty is part of our work, and we approach situations with confidence in what we have learned and with support to respond flexibly then we will hold onto the potential of social work to make a profound difference to people's lives.

Questions for reflection

What do I do when I get anxious about uncertainty?

How can I respond in a way that is helpful?

Further reading

Ayre P and Preston Shoot M (2010) **Children's Services at the Crossroads,** Russell House Publishing

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

1a Leadership

Social workers should promote and contribute to the development of positive policies, procedures and practices which are anti-oppressive and empowering. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.7)

Leader

1. a person who rules, guides, or inspires others
From Old English lǣda

When I was a manager, I had a team that moved office. As part of this I allocated desks to everyone. I did this pragmatically and without any consultation. I was really surprised when this led to uproar. People were upset, angry and distressed about the change. I hadn't considered that they had already been through a lot of upheaval. Suddenly having one more change pushed onto them was too much. I needed to quickly backtrack and approach the (necessary) change in a collaborative and open way. Unfortunately, instead of apologising and starting over, I started off by being defensive.

Leaders

Working well in uncertainty really does require leadership but leadership at all levels.

There is a saying that a good leader makes leaders. Organisations in chaos may need heroic leaders, however complex organisations need leaders who bring out the best in everyone so the whole organisation acts with integrity.

Effective leaders learn to shift their decision-making styles to match changing environments. By correctly identifying the context, staying aware of danger signals, and avoiding inappropriate reactions, they can lead effectively in a variety of situations. In a simple environment, leaders ensure that processes are in place and are understood and followed. When it's complicated, leaders create panels of experts to advise and input to decisions around different factors. In complexity, leaders need to open up discussion and make room for ideas. If we ever slip into chaos, then urgent action is needed to restore order and calm before moving back into another mode.

Leaders have authority to control and influence working culture because of their role. They also have influence through personal authority and through expertise. So people at different levels can absolutely act as leaders. It is helpful to consider what influence you have and how you use it.

There are different styles of influencing behaviour. The style you use will depend on the preference of the person you are influencing (mirroring their style can be more effective) and the effect you want to have. Persuading and asserting are push styles that aim to change behaviour through putting forward logical arguments and reasoning, or through

stating what you require and incentivising the person to change. Bridging and attracting are pull styles. Bridging involves discussion and listening to gain trust and is effective as a way of supporting persuading and asserting. Attracting involves inspiring and motivating others to join with you or follow you because of a shared purpose. This needs a clear vision and work to find common ground. Finally you may need to influence what happens through moving away when a situation needs to be diffused. This can happen positively by disengaging for example through rescheduling or taking a break. It can also happen negatively when you avoid the discussion and leave things unresolved. Moving away is not a sustainable strategy, however it can open space for a new discussion to take place.

Leaders cannot lead effectively without a destination. Leadership in uncertainty is more like leading a voyage to discover new places than about marching everyone from A to B. In this kind of journey, the vision is not of exactly what the new place will look like, instead it is about the purpose of finding it. For example, we want children to grow up happily and thrive so we are on the way to do that even though we don't know quite how it needs to be done. The vision should be constantly communicated. Each person in the organisation will also have their own personal vision and managers can help staff to find this motivation and to share it.

Leaders need to model the behaviours that are likely to make the journey succeed. They need to be self-motivated and organised for their journey, and ensure that the route is mapped as it is discovered. They also need to use their relationships to bring out the best in the whole group as that is the most likely way of reaching the destination.

Leadership style can be modified based on what we perceive and think that people need. However, our style has to fit with our values and our behaviour. Otherwise others will spot the lack of integrity and they will not trust us. Thoughtful use of ourselves and our power is the essence of good leadership as it is the essence of good social work.

Change

Social work organisations operate with change constantly. This adds another layer to the uncertainty and it is no surprise that when asked what helps in change people say leadership.

Change has an impact on individuals and groups that can be very positive but is frequently negative.

There are various models that indicate how change affects people. A useful model for social care is Prochanska and Di Clemente's transtheoretical model of change. This shows that people go through a series of stages before change is permanent; they may relapse and need to go through the cycle a number of times.

Change causes an emotional response. The emotions can range from frustration and fear to enthusiasm and excitement. As a result, some of the organisational effects of change are energy being diverted away from tasks and relationships, clashes from different emotional responses and additional demands for support.

Changes that arise, or seem to arise, from a shift in values can be the most difficult for people. Values underpin the vision and purpose of change and hold it together. If there is uncertainty about why something is being done, for example if people are told it is to improve services but it appears to be to save money, then this has an emotional and relational impact within the organisation. Leaders have to be honest about why they are seeking to change things and managers may need to mediate between the necessity for change and the desire not to take that path.

There are various factors that help people to manage change. The factors include: a vision of what things will look like when the change has happened; clear values that underpin this vision and relate to children, adults and families; aims that show what needs to happen; information about the time frame, resources, and where things have got to; the opportunity to input; space to consider how change is going; support for staff to learn and try out new ways of working; time to build relationships; success stories and feedback on things that are working. Managers have a role in ensuring that these are in place, reminding staff about them, and supporting them to make use of them.

Some people are better able to cope with change at any time than others. It is unreasonable and lacking in empathy to say that people should just carry on regardless. There will be emotions and needs. However, managers need to avoid creating victims, becoming a counsellor or fuelling self-indulgence. They should identify where there are enthusiasts and keep them motivated, link them to people who are ready to take the next step, and work with people who are resistant to understand why.

We resist change when it doesn't align with our values and goals, we don't understand or trust it, or we feel unsupported. We can also fear the possibility of failure especially when we are already under pressure. It is also natural to feel anxious about what this means for our security and career. Involvement, negotiation and persuasion can all help. Sometimes we also need to tell someone to jump in. Critical reflection is our ally in change, helping us to understand how we feel and why, what the change means, and how we can adjust and support it.

Exercise
Creating a story

Sharing a vision for the future is fundamental to good leadership. A manager needs to be able to demonstrate the value of good organisation and task management to the people s/he is wanting to carry them out. Crafting a story that is authentic, understandable, meaningful and shared can lift teams over tremendous difficulties. Every good leader needs to be able to tell a strategic story about their purpose. A good manager should have a vision for their own role, and for the role of their team in the lives of their clients, and in the structure of the organisation.

Form a group of three to four people, preferable people you do not know so well. Sit in a tight circle with chairs placed close together. Try to keep distractions like bags/phones/note pad out of the way. As a group take 10 minutes to discuss these question. Make sure everyone has a chance to talk without interruption.

- **What is the purpose of social work today?**
- **How is your organisation helpful and useful?**
- **How do you know that you are useful and helpful?**

Then using the method outlined below to craft a story about the journey of your management journey.

IN THE PAST…

Let's start by looking at how things used to be:

THEN SOMETHING HAPPENED…

Turning points:

SO NOW WE ARE GOING TO FOCUS ON…

Your strategy for how you will be in the future. These should encapsulate your values and goals as a manager and for the team you manage and the service they deliver:

Conclusion

We can all act as leaders, walking with others to a desination, if we uphold a clear vision and values. Although organisations struggle with change, it is a necessary part of working in uncertainty. Strengthening our resilience and capabilities around change, and helping others, will stand us in good stead for working with complex situations that children, adults and families face.

Questions for reflection

Where am I taking others?

How do I bring out the best in those around me?

Further reading

Local Government Association (2014) **Employer Standards for Social Workers in England**, LGA

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

2a Inter-agency work

Social workers should communicate effectively and work in partnership with individuals, families, groups, communities and other agencies. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.1)

Profession

1. a. An occupation or career

b. An occupation, such as law, medicine, or engineering, that requires considerable training and specialized study

c. The body of qualified persons in an occupation or field

2. An act or instance of professing; a declaration

3. An avowal of faith or belief

4. A faith or belief

From the Latin professare meaning to administer a vow

I worked in an intermediate care team and one day, Nikki the nurse joined. We hadn't had nurses in the team before, only therapists and social workers. Nikki was significantly more glamorous than the rest of us, and I was wary of her uniform and medical jargon.

After a few weeks we went out on a joint visit to do an assessment for someone who had a urinary tract infection. Nikki got straight to the point, asking about bladders and bowels (the questions that I found difficult). We jointly and gently found out about Mrs X's family, her life and her fears. Then I asked the difficult (for Nikki) questions about money and support. We left the assessment, Nikki driving and me navigating, with a far greater respect for the other's knowledge, skill and values – both those that were similar and those that were different. We knew that working together meant that we could help Mrs X better.

Aims

One of the strengths of social work is that it draws on knowledge, skills and expertise from a range of disciplines. The potential for cooperation and collaboration is great; as is the potential for social work to feel a bit nebulous or unclear.

Successful inter-agency work relies on a clear understanding of each other's aims and methods. This enables us to uphold each other's integrity and ability to make a difference.

Social work's identity arise from its aims and from the values that underpin how it tries to achieve those aims. These aims and values give rise to ways of working that may be at

odds with other agencies. Social work questions assumptions of normal, models that see the unusual as a problem, and approaches that impose solutions on people. Working with other agencies brings opportunities for rich practice that incorporates different knowledge, skills and experience. However, it will break down if aims are not shared or if methods clash. Multi-agency work can involve duplication or even frustration of effort when aims are not clear and are not agreed, or when approaches and procedures are not aligned.

Discussion and agreement, supported by clear protocols and communication help agencies to work in ways that enhance each other. They help us to coordinate work, share capabilities and improve our decisions. To develop shared aims and agreed methods, we all need to start with the experience and outcomes for children, adults and families. This opens a discussion about what joint working is for and what will make it successful. We can then clarify what we each bring to achieving those aims and how we will align what we do.

Discussions about working with other agencies are not abstract professional discussions. People gravitate towards a profession or a role for personal reasons. This means that conversations about aims and ways of working will be personal. For these discussions to be successful they need good relationships. We need to build relationships with key people in other agencies. It is important to model understanding of others' aims and methods that is not just about technical approaches but about human preferences.

There can be clashes between different aims and methods, for example health and social care may advocate different interventions in mental health and aim for different levels of risk management. The medical model of diagnosis and intervention remains strong and social workers can feel subsumed in multi-agency settings. It is, therefore essential for social work to be clear about its offer to other agencies in relation to how we support service users/ patients. We can reflect on and develop our understanding of our role so that we can explain our contribution to others.

Identity

Some of the major barriers in interagency/ interprofessional work come about because of different identities, cultures and philosophies.

Social work has some of the hallmarks of professionalism, such as a protected title, specific qualification and professional body. However, these are recent and it remains an emerging profession. Other, more established, professions will have stronger professional signals and indicators. These include dress, language, titles and artefacts such as a stethoscope. Working with other agencies can lead to social workers becoming less confident about their professional identity.

It is important for children, adults and families that social work identity is not unconfident or defensive. When social workers come across as powerless because they feel less confident about their identity, then they cannot properly advocate for others. We need to reflect on their professional identity, and to understand and work with other professional identities.

The IFSW definition of social work, BASW code of ethics, and PCF are a good place to start.

Spending time with other professionals, joint learning and joint work all help to build understanding. We need to be prepared to ask if we are not sure and never to assume. Staff from different professions can challenge one another's thinking, which helps to avoid habitual practice and develops our skills and knowledge.

Thompson writes that professionalism can stand for good practice, learning and ethics, or can be about elitism and power. Social work managers can model professional identity that is grounded in what children, adults and families need, and is for their benefit, and that is prepared to work with others to achieve more.

Exercise
I, We, They

We tend to use different ways to describe ourselves as individuals (I), ourselves with others (We) and others (They). The language and images that we use can enforce difference and distance. This exercise helps us to identify how we view ourselves and others, and how they view us.

In a multi-agency or multi-service group (for example social workers and health professionals, or an older people's and young adult's team) get into professional groups.

Start individually by completing the following statements:

- I value
- I would never
- I always

Then in professional groups complete the following statements:

- We value
- We would never
- We always

Then in professional groups complete the following statements:

- They value
- They would never
- They always

Once the statements are completed get together with the other professions and compare:

- your I and We statements with their They statements
- their I and We statements with your They statements

The differences are differences between how you see yourselves and how you see others.

Then compare:

- your I and We statements with their I and We statements
- their They statements with their They statements

The similarities are similarities between how you build barriers between your identity and others' identity.

Conclusion

Children, families and adults do not want duplication, repetition and confusion between agencies. They need us to work effectively with other agencies whose expertise helps us in our goal of improving their lives. They need to know what social work offers and how that fits with the other support that they require.

If we are open to discussion, negotiation and development of how we work, always with a focus on improving people's lives, then we will find people in other professions who are too.

Reflective points

How confident am I in my identity as a social worker?

How do I challenge or contribute to stereotypes of other agencies?

Further reading

Thompson N (2016) **Anti-discriminatory Practice,** Macmillan

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

3a Responsibility

Social workers should ensure that resources at their disposal are distributed fairly, according to need. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.2.3)

Responsibility

1. the state or position of being responsible
2. a person or thing for which one is responsible
3. the ability or authority to act or decide on one's own, without supervision

From the Latin respondere meaning to answer

I led a project on information sharing across children's services. The aim was for all agencies to contribute to one record. Some of the difficulties were around my position – I had referred power from the director but I didn't have a lot of actual power. So a lot of people I was talking to had a higher job role than me. So I almost had to charm them into working with me.

As well as that, a lot of the other people working with me didn't have power from their agencies either. Sometimes even the more powerful stakeholders didn't have the power to change things like their policies or finances that were needed. And we had different understandings of terms like information, confidentiality. Plus different aims.

These issues created a lot of stress. The people who were in the room weren't the right people to solve them.

Responsibility

Relationships with other agencies and joint work are helped by clarity about responsibilities. Each person needs to know what they are expected to do and that they have the wherewithal to do this. In this way, we can avoid gaps, and we will not become overwhelmed or undermined by expectations that are beyond our power.

Open discussions about roles helps agencies to build up a picture of how they interact and to identify the missing, conflicting or overlapping areas. If a nurse is going to ask a question that the social worker would ask, then the social worker can avoid duplication or confusion by liaising with them about this. This discussion may identify areas that nobody is taking real responsibility for. Managers can encourage clarity about who is doing what and why by asking questions about who is in the best position to help someone. This should be determined by who has the right relationship, capabilities and resources to act, rather than who usually does something.

Better decisions can be made by sharing the responsibility for them, for example jointly agreeing how best to protect a child. However, the authority to contribute to and agree to that decision must be clear. Dwyer points out that, otherwise, people can later disown the decision, take credit for something outside of their role or blame others. Managers can help staff to think through when shared decisions are appropriate and who should be involved in them.

We need diversity, equality and a stake in the matter. We need to have clarity about accountability.

We also need to avoid group think – an example is recent work on group supervision where adults workers had come into discussions about families and children. There were benefits from the disruption and new views. However, over time they would lessen as people got used to that new voice. A model of critical reflection that allowed people to share views in a structured way and avoided habits forming was needed.

Resources

How we work with others is affected by the power and resources that we have. People may have similar responsibilities but receive different levels of respect and remuneration. Actual and perceived differences in status can undermine people's willingness to work with one another and cause them to retreat into set ways of working. This means that the scope for flexibility and creativity in joint working can be lost. We need to respond to people's feelings of inequality as this undermines motivation and can cause people to disparage other agencies.

When there are limited resources, people tend to retreat behind specific responsibilities. It is in children's, adults' and families' interests to consider what the most effective and efficient way of meeting their needs is and to arrange this, regardless of who pays. However, in practice a social care agency taking responsibility for someone's health needs in the community rather than them being admitted to hospital is unlikely to get any of that resource back. Managers may have very limited control over how resources are managed but they can take a thoughtful and pragmatic approach to crossing boundaries when it makes sense. For example a social worker on a visit should be able to cut some brambles back from the path, rather than arrange for another agency to go and do this. The scarcity of resources is another reason to ask searching questions about the best use of people's time.

We need to show willingness to do what will make the greatest difference and meet the greatest need, and be honest about when there are barriers or gaps. We can avoid wrangles that undermine our client's humanity so that our staff don't take our problems out to the people that work with.

Exercise
Group discussions

If we are setting up a group to discuss particular situations or to learn or to make decisions, there are a number of questions we have to clarify at the start.

Purpose – what is the group for; what outcomes do we want to achieve?

Membership – who are the right people to join the group; who understands the issues; who has the power to change things?

Activity – what should the group do; what shouldn't it do?

Focus – how will the group prioritise activities?

Duration – how long will the group last; when will it be reviewed?

Authority – who is the group responsible to; what do we do if we run into problems?

(Based on Earle et al 2016)

Conclusion

Social work is rarely the only agency involved in a child's, adult's or family's life. We must work with others to effectively support people. How we interact with other agencies affects us and affects our ability to achieve outcomes. We need to keep our focus on what helps people, and not be precious.

Questions for reflection

How open is my discussion about power with other agencies?

How flexible am I prepared to be for the benefit of the people I am here to help?

Further reading

Earle F, Fox J, Webb C, Bowyer S (2017) **Reflective Supervision Resource Pack**, Dartington: Research in Practice

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

4a Culture

Social workers should be concerned with the whole person, within the family, community, societal and natural environments, and should seek to recognise all aspects of a person's life. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.1.4)

Culture

1 a. The arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought considered as a unit, especially with regard to a particular time or social group

b. These arts, beliefs, and other products considered with respect to a particular subject or mode of expression

c. The set of predominating attitudes and behavior that characterize a group or organization

From the Latin cultus, past participle of colere meaning to cultivate

When I go to a social work event I feel at home. At one level it is quite simple – there are other social workers there, talking about social work. But there is so much more to this. The words people use, the way they listen, the body language, the skills that people display, the topics they know about…all of these are part of it.

And more than this, there are implicit assumptions, 'this is what we believe, this is what we value,' that underpin the dialogue and relationships. It is relaxing to be understood and not to have to explain every part of your thought process. But…it is also hazardous. Not having to critically reflect means that unconscious assumptions or prejudice are much more likely.

What is culture?

If we just talk vaguely about culture then we won't identify how to flourish. We end up saying things like 'we need culture change' or 'culture is important' without any concrete ideas behind this.

One thing that is helpful is: Johnson and Scholes' Cultural Web (1999).

The cultural web lists the concrete elements that make up the vague idea of culture. These are

- **Stories**
- **Rituals and routines**
- **Symbols**
- **Organisational structure**
- **Control systems**
- **Power structures**

Between them, these hard and soft elements strongly indicate what matters to people who have influence in the organisation. If you go into any building or meet with any group, you can experience some or all of these. What people talk about, what they wear, what is on the walls, how they relate to one another and communicate, and how power works – all point to the kind of culture.

When agencies and professions come together to work some of these cultural areas can cause barriers and misunderstandings.

The softer areas lead to confusion about what professions offer, what we do and don't do, what our values and behaviours are. So we need to explain our identity, purpose and beliefs.

Boundaries

How well agencies work together is affected by the way in which they are structured and the systems that they use. Structures determine where boundaries lie between agencies, professionals and particular roles. Systems determine how these boundaries are crossed, for example to share information or to do a joint visit.

Different professions, roles and agencies use boundaries to demarcate where their contribution starts and ends. As specialisation grows, so do the number of boundaries. Petch talks about three levels of overcoming boundaries.

- At the micro level we need to build individual relationships and build trust.
- At the meso (intermediate level) we need to develop opportunities to cross the boundary.
- At the macro level we can also influence how services work together and the strategic support for this

Change, uncertainty and failure all contribute to using boundaries as bulwarks rather than open borders. Boundaries are also enforced or reduced based on previous experiences of working together. Anxiety and blame, for example after a child's death, can cause people to retreat into their structures. As we've touched on a previous podcast, structures also tend to be enforced when resources are stretched as agencies close down access to their services.

So what helps us overcome these cultural structural boundaries?

It might be necessary to advocate for structural change. Changes to structures demand resources and cause disruption so they must be worthwhile. We may need to advocate for these changes.

However, it may be sufficient to focus on using existing structures well.

Good communication and information sharing helps us to cross boundaries. Good communication arises from relationships that allow people in agencies to know what others are likely to need from them as well as the best way to let them know about this. If we talk openly about our culture and structures, why they exist and how we work, then we will be able to navigate boundaries for the benefit of the children, adults and families that we work with.

Hudson describes the 'holy grail' of integration as 'the acceptance of collective responsibility for a problem, as opposed to the pursuit of narrow professional concerns'. We can listen and watch for cultural signals that reinforce boundaries in negative ways, and encourage and model cultural behaviours that are open to joint work.

Exercise
cultural map

Taking each of the areas that make up culture from Johnson and Scholes work:

Stories	Rituals and routines
Symbols	Organisational structure
Control systems	Power structures

Softer areas first:

- How are our stories and rituals open to participation from other professions and agencies?
- How do our symbols act as signs of welcome and openness?

Then the harder areas:

- How do our organisation and power structures allow others to come in and us to share with others?
- How do our control systems allow us to communicate with others?

Conclusion

A culture is the sum total of behaviours in a group. We are part of a group called social work, and also part of an organisation or team. Our behaviours and actions contribute towards the culture. We can encourage behaviours and structures that benefit children, families and adults. People need to see that we are open to working with others and to making sense of each others' culture. We also need to be able to explain our own culture and strive to avoid making assumptions.

Questions for reflection

How do I build an open culture?

How do I build relationships across boundaries?

Further reading

Johnson G and Scholes K (1999) **Exploring Corporate Strategy (5th Edition)**, Prentice Hall

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

5a Expertise

Social workers should value and respect the contribution of colleagues from other disciplines. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.1)

Expert

A person with a high degree of skill in or knowledge of a certain subject

Having, involving, or demonstrating skill in or knowledge of a certain subject

From the Latin expertus, past participle of experīrī, to try

When I was a student social worker, I rang the gas supplier for one of the people I was working with to let them know that she couldn't pay at the moment and to ask them to delay cutting off the gas. I was amazed when they said, yes of course. I began to realise the power that I had – through the place I worked and the beginnings of a professional title – and how different this was from the power of the people I represented.

Expertise

Trust (that is not misplaced) allows us to act wholeheartedly and encourages us in our work.

Trust depends on confidence that you have something to offer and that you are able to deliver this. This is what it means to be an expert. People are able to trust that you can be helpful.

To act as an expert encompasses all the elements of good inter-agency working: experts have clear aims and proven methods to achieve these; they have a clear identity based on what they are able to do; they are in the right place with sufficient authority to act; and they work appropriately with people who have complementary expertise.

Social workers can claim expertise because they work skilfully day-to-day alongside people whose lives they claim to have knowledge about. An expert is defined as someone with knowledge and skills, but it comes from the word for experience. Our expertise comes from knowledge, skills and experience. It is further enhanced by the values that dictate that this expertise is co-produced with the people that we work with.

Our legitimacy relies on transparency about our expertise and where it comes from. One judge said that social workers acting as witnesses in Court can be judged to be expert if they give an objective, independent, well researched, thorough opinion, which takes account of all relevant information and which represents their genuine professional view on the issues submitted to them. In order to provide this, we need to know where our knowledge, skills and experience come from, and be confident in explaining them and using them ethically.

The fundamental characteristic of expert evidence is that it is opinion evidence. If our decisions could be calculated by a machine then anyone could make them. Since they are based on professional judgement then we must be able to make them well and to explain them to others. Expertise needs to rest on the foundation of sound evidence. This is partly about using research evidence which tells us about the likely implications of situations and responses. However, when we apply research we need to be mindful of the implications of who we are and who we are working with. This is why evidence-informed practice draws not only on research but also on practice experience and, crucially, the views of people who experience social work. This allows us to apply expertise in an individual way, shaped by who the person is and what their context is.

Using sound evidence helps us to be more confident and capable, and to be more trusted. As we encounter new situations, we can add to the evidence and share this with others. WE can also model this and support others to build their expertise so they can make a greater difference.

Sharing knowledge

People come together to build a community of practice around a shared goal, for example social workers who want to act to protect children. Communities of practice can overlap, having similar goals but different repertoires to achieve these, for example a group of police officers may also be aiming to protect children, though they practice in a different way. Some of the social work community may be in a position to act across the boundaries because they have developed a relationship with police officers in the second community. Wenger shows how they can act as agents and use activities to cross the boundary and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and expertise. This builds up a pool of expertise that different agencies can draw on through continuously adding to a shared repertoire.

It is important for communities to remain permeable and to make use of the rich knowledge that exists at their boundaries. This is where people with a variety of backgrounds and expertise may interact with the community and where knowledge can be most easily transferred, exchanged and accumulated.

Conklin and colleagues talk about knowledge brokers who help the exchange of knowledge by: creating relationships between people with shared goals; promoting mutual understanding between these people; facilitating the exchange of knowledge across the boundaries; facilitating social interaction to support knowledge exchange; developing people's capacity to work together to create, find, use and share knowledge; supporting people to overcome barriers to knowledge exchange; and analysing how these activities are working and the impact of them. Social workers are in a position to undertake this role and to model it for others. They may act as agents to exchange knowledge if they have a relationship across the boundary, or they may encourage others who span the boundary to support knowledge exchange. This might be someone who has a different professional background and works in their team.

"Social work skills of building relationships, empathising, communicating and interpreting are essential for knowledge transfer and exchange".

Exercise
Using evidence in practice

When we talk about a case or situation, the conversation tends to be based on three types of evidence:

- The practice experience of the worker and other agencies involved
- The views of the child, adult or family
- Law, policy and procedure – which may be evidence-informed.

There are other areas of evidence that should be brought into the discussion:

- Research evidence
- Theory that is underpinned by research.

Rather than just asking:

- What is happening?
- What do you and others involved think?

Also ask:

- What research helps to explain what is happening?
- What theory helps to explain what is happening?

Consider how you can find and use research and theory that relates to this kind of situation.

Conclusion

To be trusted, we must be worthy of trust – ethical, honourable and respectful. We must not just make good decisions but make them in a good way. We must be transparent, honest and approachable. When trust is present it allows people to ask for and accept help, and it makes that help more effective.

We need to be clear about our expertise and to share it. We especially need to always be able to say why children, families and adults should trust our opinion.

Questions for reflection

What information do I use to justify my opinions?

What knowledge do I need to share and what do I need to obtain?

Further reading

Ruch G, Turney D and Ward A (Ed) (2017) **Relationship-based Social Work, 2nd Edition,** Jessica Kingsley Publishing

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

6a Context

Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practice are oppressive, unfair, harmful or illegal. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.2.4)

Context

1. the parts of a piece of writing, speech, etc, that precede and follow a word or passage and contribute to its full meaning

2. the conditions and circumstances that are relevant to an event, fact, etc

From the Latin contextus a joining together, scheme, structure

My supervisor is very helpful on this. We talk about the need for me to understand practice and to have skills and knowledge and experience of what it is like engaging with a person, with a family – I try and maintain this by spending time with practitioners, engaging and working with adults and carers, and shadowing social workers.

But we also talk about the way that engaging with the wider context is social work. If you do a training day, write a resource, record a podcast…you are not directly involved with a person, you don't have a relationship at the micro scale but you are doing social work at the macro scale. And you need to follow the same ethics and have the same purpose.

Everything we do is a social work intervention.

Social and economic context

The social and economic context influences the decisions that society make about what social work is for and how much to spend on it. Social work cannot be politically neutral; it needs to engage with the decisions people make that affect it.

We need to consider how the amount of money that people have and how the aims that they hold affect the way in which they relate to people who need social work.

Changing perceptions of what society can afford and what it should be like make people more or less willing to help others. We can reflect on this across our careers so far. We can also think about how our views change on this:

- **How have our views on what should be resourced changed over time?** – does this relate to our economic status?
- **How have our views on who society should help, why and how changed over time?** – does this relate to our social status?

The places, situations, difficulties that people experience which you wouldn't want to end up in are where social workers need to be. We need to be enabling people to thrive in those places and spaces. To do this, we need to challenge not only the issues they face now but the reasons that people end up in those situations and are not easily able themselves to resolve them.

Social workers can act at the micro and macro level – to impact on individuals and on structures. We work with the person and we work to overcome the structural barriers and develop structural enablers.

Social workers don't get to decide what social work is there to do. That is a political question decided based on the values of citizens, who elect central and local representatives to enact law, policy and plans. However, we can engage in the debate about what social work should do and how it should be done.

We need to engage in that debate alongside people that we work with and for.

We are in a position to engage with the people that ideas and policies affect, and with other agents who are asked to carry them out. Our power can be used to create a partnership between the people who are affected and those who can stand alongside them.

Advocacy

We can engage in the debate about what social work should do in three main ways.

- We can help people better understand the problems that social work is there to address.
- We can help people better understand what is likely to work.
- And we can help people to better understand the likely consequences of particular laws, policies and plans.

This includes us being really open about what the impact of our own role is on people.

Each of these requires social workers to use evidence. We talked about evidence in the last podcast – we need to use evidence from adults, children and families; we need to use evidence from our professional experience; and we need to support and carry out research so that we can understand as well as possible what the impact of our work is.

Otherwise, we are just giving an opinion, and may add to misguided and oppressive action or experiment with people's lives.

This debate, and our role of ensuring that the voice of people who experience difficulties is heard is increasingly important when there is a growing gap between some people's experience and the experience of society as a whole.

Failure to thrive in society can become seen as an individual problem or even a choice. As inequalities increase and experiences become more diverse, the partnership role that allows us to create a louder voice for people at the margins becomes more crucial.

There are enablers to doing this including confidence and optimism, seeing this as part of the role, seeing this as part of professionalism, being open about power, and being prepared to debate and discuss. Social workers will also need to work against the discrimination and oppression that affects them.

Exercise
Uncovering assumptions

An exercise to help with uncovering the assumptions that are made about what should be done and what should be funded is to use the veil of ignorance. It comes from Rawls' Theory of Justice. This "veil" is one that essentially means that you could be anyone in society.

Imagine that you don't know what your social status, ability, capacity, characteristics would be.

If you didn't know where you would end up in a society, how would you structure it? What social work help would you make available, what resources would you expect people to put into this?

You wouldn't know if you were going to be providing resources or receiving help. Rawls says that in this position of ignorance, you would want to develop something that treated everyone fairly so that wherever you ended up, it would be fair.

Conclusion

The people we work with are often truly victims and we need to show them something different from victimhood. Social workers have power and the privilege to do something remarkable with and for people. How social workers encourage, support and sustain the effective and ethical use of this power is one of the main factors in the impact that it has.

Questions for reflection

How do I work in partnership with people who need social work?

How do I use evidence to argue for social work that is socially just?

Further reading

Rawls J (1971) **A Theory of Justice,** Harvard University Press

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

7a Inclusion

Social workers, individually, collectively and with others have a duty to challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation or subjugation, and work towards an inclusive society. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.2.5)

Inclusion

1. The act of including or the state of being included.

2. Something included.

From Latin inclūsus, past participle of inclūdere, to enclose

I was involved in some work to create a guide for end of life care. Social workers and people with lived experience came together to do this. One of the people with lived experience said that she could talk to people in a hospice and gather their views and stories. I sent her some ethical guidance about how to interview people. At the end of the work, when we were reflecting on what had happened, she said how offended and upset she was when I did this. I had assumed that because she wasn't a 'professional', she didn't have the expertise to interview people. In fact, she was an experienced researcher.

Exclusion

This is a difficult topic to talk about without being drawn into them and us. It is also difficult to talk about because of the barriers and boundaries to understanding the other. And it is difficult to talk about if like us you are from groups that have privilege. However it is an essential part of social work to engage with diversity and with exclusion.

Human preferences work on the basis of sympathy which is strengthened by relationships. We are more likely to help people that we know or who are similar to us. Social work immediately struggles, therefore, because we tend to work with people who are less well known or have uncommon characteristics and situations. Part of our public role is reminding society of people that are easy to forget or people prefer to ignore.

Social work is regularly divided up into different sorts of situations for example child protection, older people with mental health problems, younger adults with a learning disability. In reality, adults, children, people with different needs, from different backgrounds, at different ages all interact. Social workers should also interact with each other to make sense of the experience of people they work with and to combat exclusion together. This also helps to avoid situations falling into more or less deserving, for example where children are seen as in need but their parent's drinking is seen as a problem. Social workers need to support each other's work and stand up for social work together.

An example of this is how children and parents can be separated out. What difference, for example, can it make if children's and adults' social workers speak up about poverty together?

Through joining together, social workers can also strive to avoid people falling through the gaps. This can happen particularly to the invisible or unrecognised, for example refugees, who become ignored and pushed right out of any relationship with social structure. People are cut off by barriers that don't take account of diversity, such as transport that doesn't enable disabled people to access it and information that doesn't take account of different communication needs.

Social workers can bring the range of human experiences into the mainstream and out of the margins. They can call for a flexible approach that delivers tailored support to very diverse individuals. If you imagine two people trying to look at a painting that is behind a wall, equality would involve putting them both on an identical ladder; however justice would take account of the fact that one was taller than the other and give them each a ladder that would enable them to see. We need to argue for just and empowering responses to the situations people face.

Co-production

We can ensure that people who are excluded are heard through working with them.

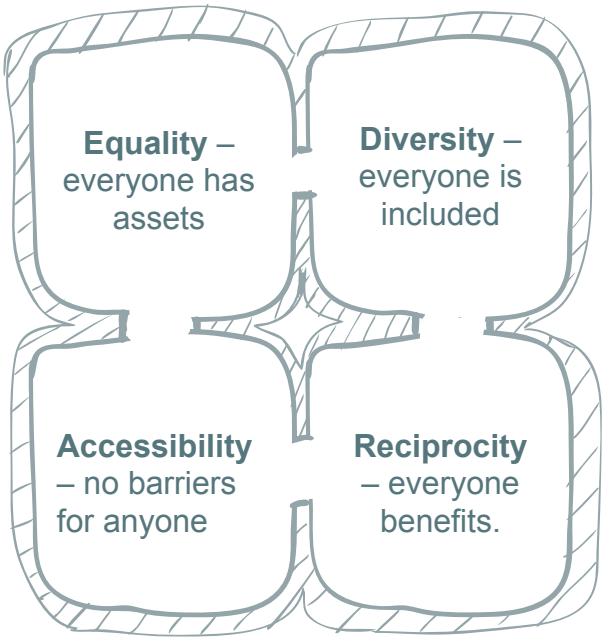
We are not experts on co-production. Although social work training and practice has always emphasised working with people as equals, we are personally a long way from true co-production, we like to manage situations, have blind spots about power, and have habits for how we do things which significantly get in the way.

However, when we have tried to work with people to create something from scratch, to design it together and to share power, we have learned:

1. It feels right
2. It teaches us about ourselves: The times when we have co-produced work, we have been called out on many assumptions we make about who is 'professional' and who can do what. It is uncomfortable but we need to hear it.
3. It results in better work: The co-produced projects we have been involved in have all been so much better than anything we or social workers alone could do.

So for these three reasons, we will keep going with co-production.

There are four principles of co-production:



Arnstein's ladder of involvement helps us to think about how we genuinely support participation.

The ladder of involvement helps us to think about how we genuinely support participation. The highest rungs of the ladder are citizen control, followed by delegated power, followed by partnership. We should be working in these areas and enabling people to take power over what happens.

The next rungs are placation, consultation and informing. We need to move on from this and, if we are on these rungs, we need to be honest about it and be really transparent on how we act on people's views.

The lowest rungs are therapy and manipulation. This is when we use power to impose change on others. We must strive to see this and avoid it. The best way to avoid it is to ask people what their experience of our work is.

Exercise
Exclusion

When we leave our familiar environment, we become an alien. We are able to experience things in a different way because the cues, shortcuts and familiar understanding that we usually bring no longer work.

This gives us insight into how it feels to be at the margins of a situation.

Arrange with a peer to observe a discussion or intervention that relates to a service you are not familiar with. This could be an adoption panel if you usually work with older people, or a multi-disciplinary hospital meeting if you usually work in child protection.

Ask your peer not to introduce you but just to say you are a colleague who is observing.

While the activity is happening, consider how it is for you in the following ways:

Experience: Think about how hard you are concentrating – the energy that is needed to follow what is happening.

Emotion: Reflect on how it feels to be separate from what is happening and not to be asked for your view.

Analysis: Take note of the jargon, acronyms and concepts – how are they acting to prevent you from making sense of what is happening?

Action: Reflect on how it feels not to have a role in what is planned, and to have no influence on the outcome.

Now consider a recent experience where you have worked with someone who had less power than you. How much of what you just felt might they have experienced? How can you reduce the experience of powerlessness?

Conclusion

In order to combat exclusion, we have to be prepared to talk about our work and how it has led us to know people who are excluded.

We need to expose oppression – the reasons for exclusion - and we need to remind voters of the consequences of their decisions on inclusion, for example where a change in government has led to cuts in benefits and pushed people out of society.

Above all, we need to empower and enable people to speak up for their own needs and aspirations. A true voice can be a powerful check on complacency and forgetfulness.

Questions for reflection

Am I prepared to talk about what I do and what I have learned about people's lives?

How do I ensure that people who are excluded are heard?

Further reading

Social Care Institute for Excellence (2015) Co-production in social care: **what it is and how to do it – At a glance, guide 64**, SCIE

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

8a Scrutiny

Social workers should be prepared to account for and justify their judgements and actions to people who use services, to employers and the general public. (BASW Code of Ethics 2.3.5)

Inclusion

1. close or minute examination

2. a searching look

From the Latin scrutinium meaning enquiry

I was in a workshop where I was talking to social workers about what influenced their decisions. One of the factors that came up was the media – what the media might say if something went wrong. All of the social workers agreed that this affected their decision making. When we unpicked it, this wasn't about being reported for doing something wrong, it was about being vilified or blamed when they were not responsible. So I asked if anyone had personal experience of this. Nobody had. In fact, nobody personally knew anyone that this had happened to (it is actually quite rare). But every single social worker was affected by the possibility that this might happen to them.

Public understanding

Scrutiny is affected by some significant issues:

- Lack of knowledge of social work
- Hindsight
- Sensationalism.

All of these impact on public opinion and how social workers are able to do their job. We need to engage with public opinion for the sake of clients as well as our own integrity. It is right that social work should be judged but it needs be judged as objectively as possible.

As we've discussed, social workers often work at the margins of society, with people who are not well recognised.

The majority of people in our society will not need social work and even more of them believe that they will not need it. Compared to more universal services such as roads or the National Health Service, social work is likely to be much less understood.

We do a complex job that is difficult to explain. Social workers don't have a single thing that they do – and social work works through relationships rather than through tools or set activities. We have a wide range of approaches, methods and theories, and we draw on other disciplines.

We also have difficulty in talking about social work because of confidentiality and the impact of open discussion on people who need social work.

We have a role in helping the public to understand what we do. This is partly a matter of accountability – social services make up a large proportion of local government spending. It is also a matter of social justice. If we think that people who need social work should be able to get it, we need to make the case for it being useful. Professional bodies, local forums and personal networks are all routes to spread knowledge about social work. We have been to universities, schools, church groups and voluntary meetings to talk about social care.

One of our biggest problems is that it is often the extreme cases in social work, and more often than not the disasters that are noticed. People are more interested in sensational information and in unusual events than in the mundane. The media responds to and feeds this appetite. When disasters do happen, then it is news, and it leads to blame so that people can be reassured that they won't have such a shock in the future. The murder of Baby P, where social workers were at fault but as part of a system, is a case in point. Simplistic and sensational reports mean that the public have a distorted picture and can lead to social workers reacting in unhelpful ways such as taking many more children into care.

We can try to redress the balance. Firstly, we can share positive examples of social work. It will not help people who need support to believe that the service they get is likely to be unhelpful or damaging. We can share stories of helpfulness personally and through our organisations. We can find allies – clients, other agencies, pressure groups – who have evidence of our value and help them to emphasise this. We do, however, need to be honest about failings in order for there to be trust in what we say.

Secondly, we can avoid falling into the hindsight trap ourselves. It is often possible to see after the event what should have been done differently. However, we need to use analysis properly to be clear about how good the decisions and action at the time was. We can then talk sensibly about what could have been done differently in that case, and what we can learn to improve in the future.

Defensible decisions

This is similar to thinking in an individual way about defensible decision making. Making a defensible decision means that you have followed the steps that it is reasonable to think that someone in your position should have followed. As a profession, the clearer we are about what good social work is likely to be and the more we use evidence, the more we can defend the decisions that we make and respond to criticism when decisions don't work out the way that we expect.

That doesn't mean though that things won't go wrong.

One of us was in a workshop once where we were asked to consider what we would say if we were in charge of an organisation working with a person who suffered harm.

It was very difficult to think through the response without getting defensive or trying to pass blame on.

We came to the conclusion that first when things go wrong we should always start by listening and accepting the reality of what we are told for the person who experienced it.

Second, we should then say we are sorry that they were hurt.

Then we can start to talk about what can be done to improve things. But we need to be open to our role in this.

We also need to be aware that there is an impact on social workers from this scrutiny. Munro found defensiveness, feelings of being scapegoated, anger and frustration, and low morale. We need to provide practical and emotional support to social workers in this environment. Otherwise people's ability to work will be compromised.

When social workers experience the impact of things going wrong, they will also need to be listened to, have their feelings acknowledge, and then have support both to work through what has happened and to persevere in their profession.

Exercise
Strong feelings

Case study:

The drive from KC's house to the hospital was less than two minutes, and the car ride was silent. I was not in a position to "debrief" Sarah, as I was still in shock and disbelief myself. At the hospital the doctor saw us immediately, x-rays were completed and a full skeletal exam was performed. Johnny had a broken rib, a broken wrist, six burn marks, four lacerations and over 62 bruises all over his eight month- old body.

Sarah and I then proceeded back to my vehicle. Once we both shut our door, I immediately burst into tears, and was crying uncontrollably and apologising for crying at the same time. I had never seen a child look like that, and I could not get over the fact that he had been suffering in pain for so long. I just kept crying and crying, and apologizing and apologising. I knew I was crying because of what had been happening to the baby, but also because I had removed a child from essentially another child, who had never really been given a fair chance at raising a child. I was crying because I felt helpless and guilty for revictimizing the mother, but also because I knew that there was no other option. Of the most significance was the fact that I was embarrassed to be crying, especially in front of a new social worker who I was training.

Read the cast study above and discuss:

- Why is the social worker experiencing this emotion?
- How is this impacting on them and others (the client, the team, you)?
- What can you do to respond and to support the client, the worker and the team?

Conclusion

If people don't understand social work or believe myths such as that it is only concerned with bad people or cannot protect them, then they will mistrust and fear it. The opportunity to make a difference will be lost.

Integrity in social work starts with individual social workers, in whatever role, being true to themselves, remaining in one piece and using their whole self. It grows as social workers join up and argue with passion and integrity for the support that their clients need and that benefits society as a whole.

Questions for reflection

How do I ensure that people don't suffer because social work is misunderstood?

How do I avoid being defensive about social work?

Further reading

Jones R (2014) **The Story of Baby P: setting the record straight,** Policy press

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

9a Evaluation

Social workers should strive to create conditions in employing agencies and in their countries where the principles of the Code are discussed, evaluated and upheld in practice. (BASW Code of Ethics 3.15)

Evaluate

1. To ascertain or fix the value or amount of
2. To determine the importance, effectiveness, or worth of; assess

From the Latin valēre to be worth

I ran a service that supported carers and one day I went to a carers' forum in a small town. I drove for about an hour to get there. And when I arrived, they did not like me one bit. The carers said that my service was difficult to get hold of, didn't have the resource that was needed and wasn't as good as what had been in place before.

I left feeling like I shouldn't have gone. I much preferred not knowing what people thought. Up till then, I had thought that our new efficient way of working was better. Now I realised that it was only better from my point of view.

Evaluation

Trust is the platform that allows social work to operate effectively. Trust is needed where there is uncertainty. If we know that something will work then we have confidence, rather than trust. People trust social workers to help them without absolute proof that they will be able to.

However, as far as possible we need to show that we are:

- Doing things that people want
- In ways that are likely to work
- And making a good difference.

Because of the uncertainty around how we can best be helpful, the issues of social control, and the ethical nature of our profession – this is particularly important.

The first thing we need is to understand as well as possible what people need and want from us. We have covered quite a lot of information about engagement, involvement and co-production. We don't want to repeat ourselves.

However a few main points:

We must ask people what they want and need

We must try to reach people who are seldom or never heard

We must be as ethical as possible in how we involve people – the most ethical approach is genuine co-production but we need to be honest about how able we are to do this.

The second thing is to use evidence to help us understand what is likely to achieve what people want.

Again, we have talked about this before, but we can't say too often that:

- Evidence will be three different kinds: evidence of people's views; evidence from research; and evidence from our practice experience
- Applying this saves us making repeated mistakes and helps us to build on what has previously been found to improve experiences and achieve outcomes.
- And it is ethical – we can't just try and experiment, we have to do what is likely to be helpful based on what we can reasonably know.

We then need to evaluate what we do.

Approach to evaluation

Friedman identified that meaningful evaluation involves understanding three things: How much did we do? How well did we do? What difference did we make?

The first question is often asked and usually answered fairly well – how many people received a service, how long for, how much did it cost and so on. The second question is about experience and usually involves gathering qualitative data from children, adults and families. Gathering this data raises more ethical issues. Asking people about their experience should be for a clear purpose, voluntary, confidential, safe and responsive.

The third question involves looking at the outcome or end result of what was done.

Ideally, when looking at difference we will have three things.

01 **Firstly**, a really clear set of outcomes that we are aiming for (what the difference will be) and a set of indicators (how we will know that the difference has happened. For an individual, that is their own outcomes. For a service, that is a set of agreed outcomes that relate to service users.

02 **Secondly,** a base line of how things are now so that we can see what difference has occurred. For an individual, a useful tool is the outcomes star. This asks people to self-assess their level against wellbeing outcomes. The points that they make on the scale form a star. Later on, you can ask the person to self-assess again, and see if the area of the star has increased.

For an individual, a useful tool is Triangle's outcomes star.

For a service, identifying what the overall situation is at regular intervals is really important. For example, looking at repeat hospital admissions or the amount of ongoing help needed for a reablement service, or the number of children and the time they spend in care for an edge of care service.

03 **Thirdly,** ideally we need a control group. This is because there are many factors that affect outcomes, for example an older person might be well supported but, due to illness, their quality of life may still reduce. This means that any change – for better or for worse- may not be down to what we did.

It is difficult to arrange formal control groups – where some people don't receive a service – for ethical reasons. However, there are often groups that can act a bit like a control group and give us some insight. For example, there may be a way of working in one part of an organisation that is not happening in another – such as a pilot – so we can compare. We may have a neighbouring organisation that is working in the way we used to so we can compare what happens with them to what happens to us when we change things. We may also be able to compare what is happening now with what happened last year or at some other time in the past. All of these are imperfect but it is important to try to understand as much as we can about what difference has been made.

Evaluation also benefits from being evidence-informed. This means that we look at what the evidence says is likely to happen when we offer a service or intervention to a group, and we then set up an evaluation that looks for those things. We can also look at the evidence of what is likely to help our actions be successful – if we then look in the evaluation to see if those things are happening then this can give us some confidence that our service might be helpful.

Learning that you gain should be clearly identified and then you will need to work with others to understand the implications. How will you transfer the learning into practice? Decide who you want to share the learning with – this is about who it will be useful to in terms of improving what they do.

With others, agree what needs to change or remain the same. How will you ensure this happens and how will you know when it has happened? Make sure everyone who needs to act on the learning is involved. Once you have acted on the learning, you need to tell the people you are there to help what you have done. In particular tell people who gave you information. You can use this example of how you have learned and changed things to encourage others to help you evaluate in the future.

In our hierarchical social care world, it is important that we send evaluation information up and down the ladder. We shouldn't just be working to imposed outcomes and responding to reports that come down to us. We should also be gathering our own information at every level and feeding it up. The most important evaluation information comes from what actually happens to people who we work with in their homes.

Example – evaluating a team

Teams need to understand how their team is working.

This starts by answering the question: how much are we doing.

- This means counting what we do and also how much resources goes into it. It is important to know what the cost of our actions are so that we can make a judgement about whether the difference we make is worth the cost.

We also need to know: how well we are doing.

- This starts with encouraging and supporting feedback. Every contact with someone who needs social work is a chance to find out about their experience and the difference that you make. Assessment and review are important opportunities and you need to consider how you can join this information up to identify patterns in experience and outcomes. You may also need to create opportunities for feedback, for example through using surveys, carrying out interviews or holding focus groups.
- It is helpful to look at the evidence about what people want from us. For example – reliability, honesty, clarity. And then to build this into the feedback we ask for. For example, you can ask parents if the team did what they said on a survey.

Most of all you need to know: what difference you are making.

- Finding out what the situation is for your service user population is a starting point. Start by setting clear outcomes – with input from service users. You should already be really clear about the main purpose of your team. You can also think about the wider benefits – in particular subjective wellbeing (how people feel about their lives).
- Identify a tool to measure against outcomes. This might be the outcomes star for individuals at assessment and review that you then collate scores from across the whole team – this helps with measuring wellbeing. You might also be measuring the amount of support people need at different times or what happens to people after your intervention e.g. do they need care? The tool needs to capture this information consistently. It is helpful to look at outcomes some time after your intervention to see if they last.
- You may also want to break down the outcomes by groups so that you know whether there is a difference for particular ages, genders, or related to other characteristics.

Conclusion

All of our evaluation needs to overcome barriers that stop people being able to have an honest say about what we do. Ethics include: consent, confidentiality, being clear that there are no consequences to giving particular views, having a way of responding to any concerns raised, and always using the feedback and letting people know what we have done as a result.

We have to work extra hard to gain trust and involve people who have had experiences of poor services or of oppression. The values of co-production – equality, diversity, accessibility and reciprocity – should underpin what we do.

Questions for reflection

How do I find out what difference I am making?

How do I use this information to improve?

Further reading

Friedman M (2005) **Trying hard is not good enough,** Trafford Publishing

HELPFUL SOCIAL WORK

Series 2

10a Ecological model

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice. (BASW Code of Ethics 1.2)

Ecology

1. (Environmental Science) the study of the relationships between living organisms and their environment

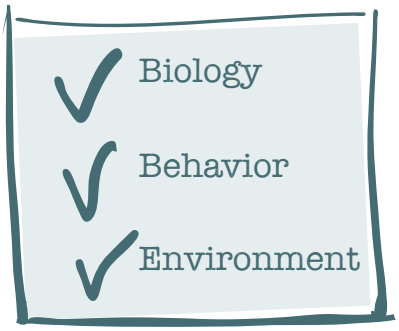
2. (Environmental Science) the set of relationships of a particular organism with its environment

3. (Sociology) the study of the relationships between human groups and their physical environment

From Greek oikos, house; and logie, study

Factors that impact on us

People have three things working for or against them – their biology, their behaviour, and their environment.



- **Biology** is the way that your brain is wired to see 'different' as 'dangerous', and the way that you respond to strong emotions such as stress (fight, flight or hide).
- **Behaviour** is the responses and the choices you make to internal and external stimulus, such as a message from your brain "different = dangerous = run" being altered deliberately to "different" = scan the environment and the circumstances = make choice to manage in a rational way. It is what you do consciously to manage stress, to seek help, to control emotions and choose how to respond.
- **Environment** is the context and the surrounding you are in. Some environments such as busy, noisy chaotic, new places will be seen by your biology as 'dangerous' or 'exciting'. These are both high level emotional responses that will react with your biology and your behaviours. They may make you react more impulsively or more cautiously or fearfully.

So this means in any social work encounter we have to consider our self, our responses to others and the whole context around us.

We also need to consider how others are affected in the same way.

- **Who am I and who is this person?**
- **How are we interacting?**
- **What else is going on?**

Understanding yourself using Balustein and Kinniburgh's Attachment, Regulation and Competency model can support you to to exert the most control over your biology, behaviour and environment possible in each circumstance.

Attachment - Your attachment model as an adult informs the way your respond and relate and seek others. As an adult if you have high expectations of the helpfulness of others, the kindness of others and the enjoyment that can be gained from others, you are more likely to reach out and hold a positive set of beliefs about the effectiveness of yourself and others in day to day interactions.

Regulation - As a mature functioning adult how you are able to regulate your own emotions internally and externally will affect how you perceive others responses and reactions and how you are perceived. Making choices about what emotion to show in communication and when to show strong emotion to what level requires emotional literacy. Being able to delay gratification also requires internal regulation.

Competency - Competency in an adult requires a belief that they are capable and deserving of good things. An ability not to see others as competition for scarce resources such as affection or material good also requires a belief in one's right to rewards.

All of these factors work together to provide us with our internal toolkit to manage our work role and environment day to day. We can then audit ourselves in terms of our biology, behaviour and environment in the workplace:

- **What can we control?**
- **What do we have to influence or adapt;**
- **What do we have to accept? or remove ourselves from?**

Ecological model

This book has been structured to reflect an ecological approach.

We started off by talking about the importance of integrity. Social work requires integrity in all senses of the word: trueness to oneself; soundness; and completeness. Social workers have to live up to the potential of social work and the motivation that led them to this work. They have to maintain resilience and sustain themselves in a challenging field. And they need to use their whole self to achieve the kind of difference that is possible in our field.

Social workers use their whole self to relate to people who need social work. We believe that good social work starts with who we are, not with what we do.

We look at the layers that influence who we are and how we behave day-to-day because it is our use of self that matters.

The layers we examined through were: our self; our environment; our colleagues; our organisation; other agencies and; the public. All of these things affect how well we are able to maintain our integrity and to fulfil our role.

Through thinking about these areas you can identify possible barriers to and enablers for good relationship.

When we are aware of ourselves and our surroundings, we can act more deliberately. We can maintain our integrity – our ethics, health and ability to use our whole self.

We can take action to overcome barriers and to develop enablers to good relationship – whether this is making sure we have eaten, recognising strong emotional responses, using reflection in action to hover over ourselves, or using emotional intelligence to manage our reactions.

We can then model this behaviour to others.

Exercise
Reflecting on an experience

Consider an experience that you had which involved other people.

For each party, think about the response to the experience. There are 4 areas of response to consider for you and for any other party involved.

	Impact on me	Impact on x	Impact on y
Things we experience: **Our physical response**			
The way we feel: **Emotions**			
Things we think: **Cognitions**			
The way we act: **Behaviours**			

So for example you might consider an assessment and talk about your own physical response, emotions, thoughts and behaviours. And then consider these for the child or parent, adult or carer.

Conclusion

Children, adults and families need us to have courage. They live their difficult lives under the pressure of public opinion and judgement, media scrutiny and political ideology. They grapple with the impact of economic and social changes. They experience exclusion, blame and control.

People who need social work – adults, children and families – experience the same barriers and enablers as we do. We need to understand these layers, and reflect on how they impact on people who need social work and how we can support them to have integrity too.

Questions for reflection

What kind of social worker do I want to be?

What legacy do I want to leave?

Further reading

Featherstone B, Gupta A, Morris K and White S (2018) **Protecting Children: a social model,** Policy Press