Relational social work


Published in:
Routledge Handbook of Social Work Theory

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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Karen Winter Relational social work

Introduction

Taking as the start point the internationally accepted definition of social work, most recently ratified by the International Federation of Social Workers ([IFSW]2014), social work is defined as ‘a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing’. Based on this definition, it is evident that relationships are core to social work practice and relational social work is key to achieving its aims and objectives. There is a growing literature to support this view. That relationships are central is ‘common sense’ at one level and yet, at another level, it is apparent that there are differences in definitions, conceptual and theoretical underpinnings and hoped for outcomes.

Definitions of relational social work practice

An agreed definition of relational social work practice is hard to come by (Ruch, Turney & Ward, 2010; Megele, 2015) but perhaps the best articulated is from Tosone (2004, p. 481) who states ‘relational social work is the practice of using the therapeutic relationship as the principle vehicle to effect change in the client’s systemic functioning referring to the inherent interconnection of the intrapsychic, interpersonal and larger community systems’. The key characteristics of relational social work are threefold: first, the relationship is the mechanism through which change is achieved; second, the dyadic, potentially therapeutic, fluid and largely asymmetrical nature of the relationship between service user and social worker is key; third, the inextricable links between the interpersonal, intrapersonal and structural worlds of both practitioner and service user are central to the processes through which engagement, communication and collaboration to achieve desired outcomes take place. In considering definitional parameters, one of the emergent issues is whether ‘relationship-based practice’ is a set of principles or more of a conceptual, theoretical model or approach.

Relational social work as a set of practice principles

As a broad set of guiding principles that centre on the quality of professionals’ relationships, it is no surprise to find that these resonate well with social workers because they reflect core professional values and our professional identities. These principles focus on: being real, respectful, resourceful, reliable, accessible, flexible, truthful, genuinely interested, empathic, committed, responsive in thoughtful ways; and also on being able to regulate one’s own emotional responses and react responsibly to the emotions of others (see Chapter 10). A supporting body of research indicates that people involved with social services value professionals who demonstrate these qualities (Reimer, 2013). Often this is where discussion about relational social work begins and ends: a set of commonly agreed principles to which the profession can sign up. However, the literature on relational social work indicates several conceptual and theoretical frameworks that either focus primarily on the intrapersonal aspects of relational practice, or its interpersonal social structural components. Importantly, it is understanding the processes by which social workers hold in tension the intrapersonal and

1
interpersonal elements of relational encounters that is the focus of conceptual and theoretical frameworks of relational practice. As Bower (2003, p. 3) has argued, ‘one of the uniquely valuable aspects of social work is the balance it holds between understanding and working with the internal and external realities of people’s lives. The balance of course is an ideal and in reality, workers may move between internal and external considerations and between action and reflection’.

**Relational social work as conceptual and theoretical frameworks**

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks focus on one of the following or a combination of themes from the perspective of the social worker or service user or both. These themes are the intrapersonal, the internal workings of the individual’s mind and emotion); the interpersonal, the individual in their immediate context; the social structural, positioning within society that takes account of stratifications and the discrete nature of these as well as their intersubjectivity. The relevant stratifications include class, gender, age, disability, race, religion, ethnicity, culture and political affiliation.

**Intrapersonal**

At the intrapersonal level, the psychodynamic approach, which houses many different theories including psychoanalysis[], focuses primarily on individual psychology, personality and the individual’s internal world, their internal reality. It provides both a theory of personality and an approach to practice. Often associated with clinical social work or psychiatric social work, the psychoanalytic approach was hugely influential historically. Goldstein (2009, p. 7) points out that in the 1920s, psychoanalysis contributed to the professionalisation of social work and that: ‘Social work practitioners, many of whom eagerly sought psychoanalytic treatment and supervision, began to use many psychoanalytic techniques with their clients’. Gaining further popularity in the 1940’s onwards and associated with the work of Freud, Melanie Klein, Donald and Claire Winnicott to name a few, within the parameters of a formal therapeutic relationship, the social worker and individual service user engage in a process that sought to explore, give expression to and resolve the internal, conscious and unconscious conflicts caused by the impact of adverse external events.

In the 1960s–70s onwards, the influence in social work of the psychoanalytic approach to understanding and addressing relationship dynamics fell by the wayside as a more sociological approach, with its emphasis on external, social structural processes and their impact became increasingly influential (see Chapters 28-33). Mobilisation around gender, race, and poverty that highlighted the impact of social structural issues as well as a growing antipathy towards the medical model were contributing factors. Indeed, Hamilton (1953, p. 23), who advocated the psychoanalytic approach, argued that ‘it was one of the aberrant features of the attempt to carry psychoanalytic principles and techniques into casework that treatment became so preoccupied with the inner life as almost to lose touch with outer reality and the social factors with which social workers were most familiar’.

Having said that, more recent work (Sudbery, 2002; Ruch et al., 2010; Megele, 2015) draws explicitly on psychodynamic theory. Sudbery (2002), for example, provides useful insights by explaining terms and their applicability. Of transference, Sudbery (2002, p. 153) states ‘Whatever its debatable characteristics, ‘transference’ refers to the propensity of a helping
relationship in the present to have echoes of the situation when the user of service was a child and needed assistance or care from their parent. ‘The patient sees in him[her] the return, the reincarnation, of some important figure out of his childhood or past, and consequently transfers on to him feelings and reactions which undoubtedly applied to this prototype’ (taken from Freud, 1940/1949). On countertransference, Sudbery (2002) illustrates its use in helping the social worker identify how the person involved with social services makes them feel, stepping out of this and using the feelings to respond in a therapeutic way. Two points emerge from this of relevance to developments in individual psychology and social work. The first is that these concepts are equated with a medical model which is criticised because of its pathologising tendencies, an over focus on the individual and their internal ‘deficits’. The second is that knowledge of these terms and their applicability and relevance, is seen to be the domain of specialist, therapeutically-trained professionals and beyond the relevance of reach of the social work profession more generally. One exception to this is attachment theory still used implicitly and explicitly to inform assessments and decision making (see Chapter 14).

**Interpersonal**

As alluded to above, relationship-based practice involves an appreciation not just of the individual but of their social context, their positioning within it, their interaction with it, and their daily lived experience of it. This conceptualisation is captured in the social casework model and its reiterations. Historically, the parameters of this approach were set out by Richmond (1922, p. 98-9) in her work on social casework in which she states: ‘Social casework consists of those processes which develop personality, through adjustments, consciously affected, individual by individual, between [people] and their social environment’. She identified four components to social casework: insight into individuality and personal characteristics; insight into resources, dangers and the influence of the social environment, direct action of mind upon mind; indirect action through the social environment (1922, p. 101-2).

Effective relationships were built through case work which combined: social investigation (gathering information); social diagnosis (identifying the main social issues); social relationships (cooperation with all sources of assistance) and social reinstatement (that is the ‘treatment’ or restoration of an individual/family back to their former self and the (re)building of supportive relationships with extended family and community). In emphasising the balance that should be given between the individual and the environment, she said that the social worker must be ‘no more occupied with abnormalities in individual than in the environment...no more able to neglect one than the other’ (Richmond, 1922, p. 98; quoted by Cornell 2006, p. 50 +). In her summary, Richmond (1922, p. 255) noted that effective casework relationships depended on ‘a knowledge of innate make-up and of the effects of environment upon an individual. The failure of a case worker to learn [their] client’s social and personal background usually means failure to affect any permanent adjustment, but these diagnostic processes interplay with those of treatment [and that] action ranges from the humblest of services guided by affection, patience, and personal sympathy, to such radical measures as complete change of environment, the organization of resources where none existed before, and the reknitting of ties long broken’.
This social casework framework that outlined the nature of relationships between social workers and the people they worked with, has been taken forward and developed in different guises since that time. Its foundational pillars, ‘person in their immediate and wider context’ and the role of professional as intervening to affect change in the intrapersonal, interpersonal and wider social structural context, have remained untouched but the ways this is understood vary have varied (Cornell, 2006). Cornell (2006) notes that Hamilton’s work (1940) *Theory and practice of social casework* incorporated psychoanalytic concepts into the social casework model, as did Hollis (1964) in *Casework: A psychosocial therapy*; Turner (1978) *Psychosocial Therapy*; and most recently Sudbery (2002); Ruch et al. (2010) who adopt a model based on psychoanalytic and psychosocial systemic approaches in *Relationship-based social work* and Megele (2015) who does similarly in *Psychosocial and relationship-based practice*.

**Contemporary thinking regarding relational social work**

In the most recent literature, Sudbery (2002), Ruch et al. (2010), Turner (2012) and Megele (2015) are agreed that following a period of declining popularity relationship-based practice has seen something of a revival. They also agree that an effective model of relationship-based practice should be theoretically informed, practically relevant, accessible; applicable with all age groups, from diverse backgrounds and in any setting whether fieldwork, residential, therapeutic. Change for the better should be the goal and the outcome. Their contribution has built on an expanded knowledge in the intrapersonal, interpersonal and social structural elements of relational practice from the perspectives of both those at the receiving end of relational social work practice and the social workers engaged in relational work.

At the intrapersonal level, all writers explore the relevance to social work practice of key concepts associated with a broadly psychodynamic approach, attachment, transference, countertransference, defense, resistance and use of self. They note that there is an argument to say that where once there was a gap in social work knowledge regarding social structural issues and their impact on relational practice, the pendulum has swung the other way and there is now a gap in basic understanding about individual psychology and its contribution to relational practice. Bower (2003) argues that given the issues, such as abuse, rejection, violence, neglect and trauma, experienced by people who come to the attention of social services, there is a need for social work professionals to be equipped with an understanding of the human mind, its conscious and unconscious workings and the role played by emotions. Not least, this understanding would enable social workers to make sense of why people respond to them in the ways they do through transference. It would also enable social workers to understand why different feelings, such as inadequacy, being overwhelmed, rage, sadness, confusion, and untrustworthiness, are aroused in them when in contact with different people. And through countertransference they can appreciate how they can articulate and use these feelings to challenge and effect change in the people they work with. Focusing on intrapersonal elements to relational social work practice, Reimer’s (2013) study explored parents’ views of their relationships with social workers where child neglect had been an issue. Reimer noted that parental resistance, a common feature at the start of the relationship with the social worker, sometimes transformed into a trusting and collaborative relationship. This was especially so where the parents had ‘tested out’ the trustworthiness of the social worker and where a shared interest provided common ground from which to conduct their relationship. Understanding these relational dynamics in terms of transference and
countertransference enhances the therapeutic potential of relationships between social workers who work in fieldwork and the families and individuals they are in contact with.

Combined with this, the interpersonal context that enables or hinders relational work for both social worker and those involved with social services has been further explored. People’s willingness or unwillingness to engage with social workers has been explored; it may relate to family pressure, shame, fear and denial; (Winter, 2015; Winter, Cree, Hallett, Hadfield, Ruch et al., 2017; Ruch et al., 2017). For social workers, greater recognition of the interpersonal context has led to research that focuses on work setting and organisational cultures (Ruch, 2005). Although representing attempts to re-align social casework or relationship-based practice to take better account of the social contexts in which people are positioned, one of the continued critiques of the psychosocial approach is whether it has been successful in achieving a balanced focus on both the individual and their social context (Turney, 2012). Whilst the former elements of models of relationship-based practice are well developed, articulations of the social context and social structural considerations remain less well developed.

To address gaps in thinking on the social structural context, Turney (2012) takes a different approach, using Honneth’s (1995) work on recognition, respect and reciprocity to enhance our understanding of the social context in relationship-based practice. Applying this to social workers’ statutory relationships with families, Turney (2012, p. 151) argues that ‘an approach informed by recognition theory can support the development of a model of relationship-based practice that engages more effectively with both the social and the psychological’. She notes, however, that the critique of Honneth’s work is its focus on micro interactions. A model that combines recognition (self, legal and social) and redistribution (goods and services), as outlined in Fraser’s work (2003), for example, would allow for the development of a model of relationship-based practice where issues in the social context are more fully addressed through an explicit social justice approach. That said, Turney (2012) draws on Garrett’s (2009) stance, arguing that Fraser’s work has an underdeveloped conception of the State. This is an important consideration for social workers who both work for the State and who encounter individuals where the impact of social structural issues requires a State level response.

**Issues and challenges in relational social work**

Social work as a field of practice is located within and shaped by several competing discourses that ultimately impact on the nature, purpose and anticipated outcomes of relational work. Prevailing discourses include managerialism, with its emphasis on the bureaucratic and technocratic elements of practice; risk adversity, with its emphasis on the identification and management of risk; accountability and value for money, with its emphasis on cost effectiveness, evidence of effectiveness and outcomes. Alongside that is the growing influence of counter discourses, including professional expertise in exercising judgment, intuition and creativity and on the value of meaningful relationships as the vehicle through which change is achieved. Each of these shapes relational social work in a different way.

At ground level, in working with people known to social services, social workers face the reality that there are contexts where elements of relationship-based practice remain aspirational rather than a reality because they cannot be all things to all people. The reality also is, that some social workers may not like the people they encounter and vice versa. There
are other contexts where the experience of a relationship with a social worker will be rated poorly by families regardless of the existence of high quality relationship-based aspects because ‘it-is-what-it-is’, a social worker relationship. Furthermore, there are contexts where relationship-based practice principles and real situations do not appear compatible. Social workers ask families to trust them and to engage in meaningful relationships. Yet at the same time they know that with staff turnover, staff sickness and the transfer of cases between teams, they are asking families to trust different social workers repeatedly. Social workers are tasked in their child protection work to retain a ‘respectful uncertainty’ and to ‘think the unthinkable’ about some of the information shared by families and the family issues to which they become privy and it is obvious that this mind-set does not sit easily with the principle of establishing meaningful, reciprocal relationships.

Beyond this, effective relational social work practice is related to emotional intelligence (see Chapter 10), ability to work with uncertainty and the availability of good supervision and team working that incorporates space to reflect (see Chapter 35). It is known from research (Wastell et al, 2010; Winter et al, 2017) that social workers’ ability to ‘put themselves out there’ for the sake of relationships, is compromised by pressures associated with organizational cultural norms where greater value is attributed to an ‘objective, emotionally distant, detached’ approach in executing roles and functions over a more ‘subjective, close and relational’ approach. This, in turn, limits opportunities to develop skills in emotional intelligence because these depend, in part, on the availability of safe space to reflect on and recognise the emotions of others, manage one’s own emotions and manage the emotions of others. It is also known that in a context of depleted resources, high caseload pressure the potential of supervision is reduced to its managerial components only and its educative and supportive roles diminished. Lastly, with the growing emphasis on ‘fluid workspace’ (hot desking) teams are fragmented and the opportunity to derive support from colleagues reduced.

Taking the workplace setting of the social worker, in the statutory fieldwork sector, for example, that most relationship-based social work practice, if we are honest, is instrumental and focused on the individual in their immediate context. Social workers are not engaged in relationships for relationships’ sake. Nor do the people they work with engage in relationships with social workers for relationships’ sake. Relationship-based practice is engaged in to achieve goals established as part of our professional and statutory duties. These, as Trevithick (2003) notes, could include gathering information for an assessment which will enable identification of where change might be best effected. Or a social worker might set out, under the guise of relationship-based practice, to gain insight into the views of a child for the purposes of a court report that will inform contact and living arrangements. This might be combined with applications to organizations to seek financial help or deal with housing issues and similar matters. In so doing, most of the work is aimed at enabling individuals to function better within the resources available to them rather than effecting fundamental change at the social structural level (Turney, 2012).

In a different workplace context, for example the residential child care sector, the meaning of relationship-based practice is somewhat different because the potentially therapeutic nature of the settings is more explicitly acknowledged and the proximity and intensity of relationships is more evident. In residential child care, recent policy and practice developments have sought to embrace the value of therapeutic relationships and various models of care that stress this, have been introduced into the sector (Winter, 2017).
include: the attachment, self-regulation competence (ARC) model; the sanctuary model; the family teaching model (FTM); the social pedagogical approach; trauma systems therapy (TST); the Care (CARE) model; PATHS; and positive peer cultures (PPC). Common themes underpinning these approaches are: a focus on the centrality of attachment relationships; the importance of trauma-informed practice, that is, understanding the impact on children of exposure to trauma; staff who are attuned, aligned and responsive to the circumstances and contexts of children and young people rather than reactive to their behaviour; and an organizational context that supports staff and children. Research (Berridge, Biehal, Lutman, Henry & Palomares, 2011; Macdonald, Millen, McCann, Roscoe & Ewart-Boyle, 2012) indicates that, while staff and young people value their relationships with each other where these models are in evidence, there are real challenges for workers in implementing elements of relationship-based practice such as displays of emotion and intimacy, including holding, touching, comforting and showing acts of kindness. Such challenges are heightened in a context where discourses of managerialism and risk adversity dominate. The influence of these discourses is ever-apparent given the recent media attention of appalling historical neglect and abuse in the sector (Brown et al., in press).

In addition to these points is the question of how transformative relational social work is and can be. Or is it good enough that it is just instrumental? Looking critically at outcomes, effective relational social work practice could be measured several ways. These include: its intrapsychic impact, enabling people to develop an attachment, improve self-esteem, confidence, well-being; and its interpersonal impact, helping people develop their strengths to better manage with what personal, social, economic resources they have and can gain access to. These outcomes in effect maintain the status quo. Alternative outcomes might include social structural impacts, for example in empowering people to challenge the structural inequalities that have given rise to some of the needs in the first place and in lobbying on behalf of those in contact with social services so that the unacceptable never becomes acceptable. Research highlighting the views of service users indicates that in each of these aspects, they have found their relationships with social workers to have been transformative, either in how they felt about themselves, how the help they received helped them manage their circumstances or how they dealt with wider social structural issues. It is argued however, that more needs to be done regarding positioning the profession as a ‘political’ enterprise in its broadest sense. That means not just engaging in relational work for instrumental reasons but engaging in relational work to address and challenge the effects of inequality at all levels. This approach honours relationships in their totality, the individual, their immediate context and their positioning within wider social structures. It is also a way of honouring the true nature of the profession as so defined at the start of this chapter. Featherstone, Gupta, Morris & Warner (2016), (2016a), and Gupta (2017) reflect this in appealing to the social work profession to frame relationships with families within the context of a full understanding and appreciation of the impact of wider social structural disadvantages on them. Similarly, they propose a realignment of relational work away from its focus on ‘intervention and problem-solving’ concerned with intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics to listening, challenging and supporting at a social structural level. The latter draws strongly on social workers’ contribution to community development and on their broader advocacy role (see Chapters 27 and 32).

**Going forward and doing things differently?**
There have been developments with regards to relational work. At a conceptual and theoretical level, recent literature has focused on developing its social structural elements. Turney (2012) applies Fraser’s conceptual framework to relational social work. With its core concern being social justice and its dual focus on recognition (personal, legal and social) and redistribution (resources and services), it emphasises the importance of relational social work in a social structural context. Featherstone et al. (2016) and Gupta (2017) suggest a social model to the administration of child protection services based on Sen’s (1985) capability approach (CA) again with its core focus on social justice obligations. Hence, both contributions remind us that relational work should fully take account of and engage with social structural inequalities.

At the levels of policy and practice several developments have aimed to take forward more flexible approaches to relational social work that take account of wider social structural issues. In England, in the Children’s Social Care Innovation Programme (http://springconsortium.com), the government is investing £200 million to fund locally-led innovative models of service delivery that generally have as one of their pillars the centrality of meaningful relationships.

At the level of social work training, Lefevre’s (2015) work has made an important contribution to the social work curriculum regarding communication and relational skills. Such developments are having a noticeable impact on daily practice as evidenced in recent research (Smyth, 2017; Winter et al., 2017; Ruch et al., 2017).

To end, many of the contributions described above highlight three fundamental elements to relational social work practice: first, its central importance to all that we are as a profession and all that we seek to effect; second, that it is an endeavour that must encompass a combined, interrelated focus on the individual, immediate social context and wider social structural issues; and third, to do this requires the profession to assert itself as a ‘political’ endeavour. In these sentiments there is nothing new, they reflect the thoughts of Richmond nearly 100 years ago. What is new is the current political, economic and social context that the social work profession finds itself in and how it organises its priorities going forward.

Further reading


References


