

Reflections on lifespace intervention in social work

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Abstract

This article is a reflective piece about my own personal experience of frontline social work practice during this surreal time that we continue to live through. The response to the pandemic has brought challenge but has also created positive opportunities for reflection, change, motivation and for me personally, created a re-energising for the parts of the 'job' I had forgotten just how much I missed. By 'job' I mean not my job as a social worker or residential child care worker, but the job of building relationships and connecting with people by just spending time with them.

Keywords

Relationships, lifespace, social work, residential child care

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Introduction

This article is a reflective piece about my own personal experience of frontline social work practice during this surreal time that we continue to live through. When I was a student there was a strong focus on prioritising time to critically analyse and reflect on our practice and what impacts on our work in quite a formal way. Remember the reflective logs during placement? As we become more experienced and workloads increase, our capacity to explore and put our reflections down on paper becomes more difficult to prioritise. However, engaging in the process of critical reflection is an important part of the social worker role in terms of identifying challenges and successes.

Critical reflection is defined in various ways in research. However, Fook (2012) highlights the agreeable view that developing our skills around reflection increases our ability to be transformative, in terms of the capacity to positively impact our practice and 'to involve and lead to some fundamental change in perspective' (Cranton, 1996, pp. 79–80).

The process of writing this piece has allowed me to meaningfully reflect on areas of my practice, especially around relationship-based practice and consider how social workers can perhaps be enabled to work in more reflective and relationship-based ways.

Reflections

The experience of the last 18 months has been a very surreal one. I did not imagine that I would live through a global pandemic, and I wonder what the long-term implications will be on the world, our life and what happens now and next. Me and my colleagues are also wondering what work life will be like when there is still a need to protect each other from the virus whilst also protecting the needs of the children, young people and families we work with as best we can.

As a significant part of the workforce was required to shield, myself and my social worker colleagues in Scotland, the UK and the rest of the world have faced

many challenges. However, we have continued to go the extra mile, worked even more extra hours, worked extra days, and taken on additional duties to help each other to support the workforce and most importantly the families, children and young people who have continued to need us. Ferguson, Kelly and Pink's (2021) recent research highlights just how complex the moral and practical dilemmas are that services have faced when responding to complex child protection needs. We have also realised how important we are to each other as teams, colleagues and friends. We have missed the informal peer support we gave each other, which we perhaps didn't know we needed until the effects of the pandemic took away these valuable moments of being there for each other. The fears about home working, 'bubbles' and hot desking that are around as we tell the people within strategic roles that we must protect the relational security of our vocation — and we want and need our teams back together soon.

However, the response to the pandemic has also created positive opportunities for reflection, change, motivation and for me personally, created a re-energising for the parts of the 'job' I had forgotten just how much I missed. By 'job' I mean not my job as a social worker or residential child care worker, but the job of building relationships and connecting with people by just spending time with them. As a residential child care worker I used to do this every day: the walking to the shop; the watching TV; the playing football; the doing homework; the having fun; the brushing their hair; the being there during the rhythm and routine of the day. These are the activities that may be questioned as not being a good use of a social worker's time in a profession that is increasingly saturated by the demands of child protection, report writing, case recording and assessment. However, I would argue that engaging in these sorts of opportunities are sometimes the best use of our time given the theories behind relationship-based practice and the view that the task of assessment takes place within the context of a relationship. Relationships are universally acknowledged as crucial to our practice; 'the heart of social work' (Trevithick, 2003) and the thing that 'underpins social work practice in all its forms' (Ruch, Bryan & Hingley-Jones, 2016). Much of the literature which discusses child and youth care cites the words of Uri Bronfenbrenner who argues that 'every child needs at

least one adult who's crazy about them' (1977, p. 5). Gilligan (2008) also advocates for the necessity for children and young people to experience an 'emotional connection' to another human to influence 'healthy human development (2008, p. 46). An attachment perspective recognises that 'relationships are generally the place where things can go wrong in the first place, but equally relationships are generally the place where things are eventually put right' (Howe, 2005, p. 204). This strengthens the argument that creating environments within social work that encourage young people and their social worker to establish and build positive, genuine connections which value the therapeutic benefit of spending time together is vital... challenging, but vital.

When reflecting on the opportunity I have had during the pandemic to support the residential services within the local authority I work in, I found this to be an enriching, positive, fun time. This has enabled me to remember the value that both young people and adults can gain by spending time together doing what may appear to be nothing but is in fact an important therapeutic exchange in terms of that relationship. I have missed working in the 'lifespace' with young people and I will use this as a reminder of how valuable this approach is to social work practice.

Steckley (2013) discusses that the term 'lifespace' was first coined by Kurt Lewin in relation to residential child care to help illustrate to care workers the 'totality of the care task' that they undertake (p.24). Steckley discusses the potential of the residential milieu and the opportunities that arise to nurture the therapeutic relationships that exist, and how these can be embraced. Literature would suggest that residential child care workers have a huge advantage over statutory social work professionals in terms of relationships given their position and opportunity to engage in work within the 'lifespace' (Ward, 2007, p. 17). What a worker does in response to a particular behaviour or event is sometimes called 'lifespace intervention' (Smith, 2005). For me, in my role as a residential care worker, terms such as 'lifespace intervention' and 'opportunity-led work' provided a conceptual and theoretical framework from which to make sense of and describe my role. In relation to residential child care, Ainsworth (1981) stated that 'practitioners take the theatre for their work the actual living situation as shared and experienced by the child' (p. 234). When embracing a

lifespace intervention approach to our practice we should remain mindful of the benefit that the conscious use of everyday opportunities can have for children and young people. A skilled, self-aware practitioner will have the ability to engage with a young person meaningfully in a therapeutic way about their lived experience using these everyday opportunities. Lifespace interventions should have a purpose or goal and have the potential to reinforce the actions that are identified in the Child's Plan. For example, if what we want to happen is for the child to be safe and protected from the exposure from parental domestic abuse then we should play alongside the child when he or she begins to play with Lego and recreate violent scenarios between mum and dad, as these may be memories from the child's own lived experience and create opportunities to provide a therapeutic response. Or if what we want to happen is for the child's emotional wellbeing and mental health to be supported then we need to create opportunities for learning and conversation around this. For example, choose a movie to watch with a relevant theme that can encourage a chat about feelings and how this may relate to the child. By doing this the adult can connect with the child in a way that makes sense to them in a purposeful but therapeutic way. Although, this way of engaging with a young person can sound simplistic, it is a skilful task and requires practice and an awareness of our use of self to enable us to spot the opportunities for communication and engagement that may arise during interactions, and then decide how to best respond (Ward, 2002). Allsopp (2007) discusses the complex nature of lifespace work and highlights the risk that some professionals can be in the lifespace of a child but are unable or unaware of how to engage in the opportunities that are being provided to them by that child.

In considering how social workers can embrace a lifespace approach to practice it is important to remain mindful that unlike a residential child care worker social workers may not care for young people in the same way, but we do care about the young people we work alongside. Therefore, when considering the framework of lifespace intervention, our lifespace with the young person will be our relationship. It can be argued that we will have more potential to strengthen these relationships when interactions do not only take place within 'planned sessions' that have a specific focus usually determined by us. In my experience

the having fun and co-creating memory making moments can have a tremendous impact on the quality of a relationship with a young person. I am not naïve to the fact that social workers usually become involved with a young person following some sort of crisis and our interactions may not always feel positive at those times. Research carried out by Hill (1997) argues that children and young people who have a social worker have experienced the abuse of adult power. He suggests that being mindful of how we engage with young people has the potential to help redress the impact of abuse of power if they are enabled to feel they have influence and some degree of control over their lives and how they engage with us. His research also found that the young people spoke most positively about the relationship with their social worker that was established through spending time with each other.

Conclusion

So, to reflect on what I have learned during the pandemic and my time supporting the residential services, I have realised that I have missed the relational focus, therapeutic potential and fun of the lifespace.

Social workers should be enabled and supported by their employer to challenge cultures that maintain barriers which do not fulfil the aims of The Promise and nurture the workforce to feel 'supported to listen' to children and young people creatively when they need it, not only how and when the needs of the business dictate (Independent Care Review, 2020). Listening to children and young people is enshrined in law and policy and it can be argued that when we are unable to listen as well as we want to it is usually the result of the bureaucratic pressure that is placed on the workforce. The recently published English Government commissioned children's social care review's *The Case for Change* report simply stated that 'the greatest value of social work is the interaction between social workers, children and families' (The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, 2021, p 77). However, the *Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review, Changing Lives* (Scottish Executive, 2006) documented similar findings, stating that the quality of the therapeutic relationship between social worker and individual or family is critical to achieving successful outcomes.

Therefore my colleagues and I feel deflated that despite historic call for change little appears to have shifted in terms of providing the workforce with the space and time to focus on relationships given that the same messages continue to come out from significant case reviews, research and government reviews of our systems. (Munro Review, 2011; Morrison, 2016)

Messages from research and discussions with my colleagues and managers suggest social workers want the decision makers and influencers who operate at a strategic level to better understand that the task of establishing, building and maintaining relationships with children, young people and their families is an essential yet complex, skilful, emotional process. It is a process that requires us to invest our time in order to maximise the therapeutic potential that our relationship-based interventions can have.

As social workers we are aware that for a therapeutic intervention to be as successful as it can, it must be engaged with within a genuine, meaningful relationship. We want to invest more of our time in these relationships and in my experience our managers want to help us to do this more, too.

This can be challenging for social workers especially in the current climate and pressure faced by the workforce. However, I am optimistic when considering The Promise and the drive for Scotland to 'build a country that cares, made up of services that work to meet the needs of children' (Independent Care Review, 2020, p. 9). Social workers already do care enormously and the call for 'strategic, needs based planning for children so they are provided with warm, relational, therapeutic, safe, loving environments when they are required' would suggest an understanding that the workforce is not the issue, and it is the structures around the workforce need to change (Independent Care Review, 2020, p. 112).

Social work will always be underpinned by legislative frameworks and policy to guide the basis of our intervention and assessments, and reports will always be required from us to evidence the impact of these interventions. However, if the social work profession can be mindful of the benefit of adopting a lifespace approach to practice in the same way that the residential child care profession

are, I think that is that can only be a good thing for the workforce and the young people in terms of relationship based practice.

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