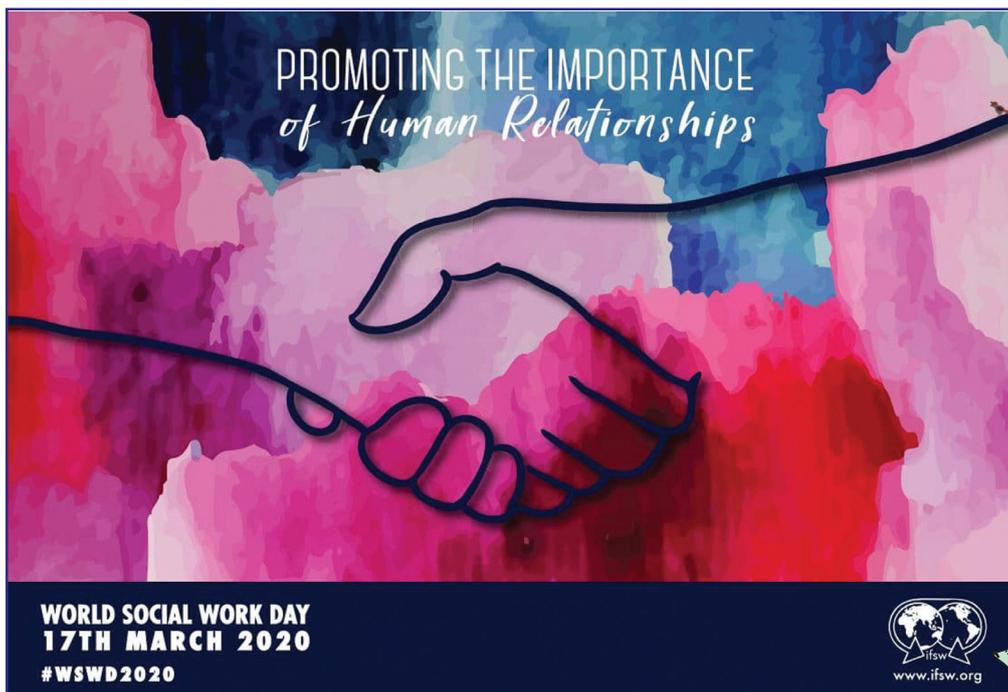


WORLD SOCIAL WORK DAY ASSIGNMENT

SWU are proud to feature the winners of the Competition

Competition marked by
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The criteria: a 750 - 1000 word assignment with the following title:

“Working better together: How do we build stronger relationships between social workers and people using services?”

Who could take part: Social Work Students undertaking an Undergraduate or Post Graduate Social Work Degree

The prize: four grants of £500



Working better together: How do we build stronger relationships between social workers and people using services?

Holly Clarke - University of Lincoln

Beyond two metres apart – Using social media to build stronger social work relationships over distance.

The theme of relationship building within social work almost always presupposes the physical proximity of social worker and service user. The corona virus pandemic, however, has called into question our previous concepts of connecting with other people. If high quality and effective interventions can still be achieved at a time of social distancing, what methods can we carry forward to ensure that this learning does not go to waste? Could this be a pivotal point for social work, where a move to the use of technology in relationship building over distance could follow as a natural consequence to the changes that we have made over the past months?

The thought of using social media for professional practice fills many with dread at the potential ethical quagmire that this could cause. The profession has called loudly for formal social media policies, from both professional bodies and employing organisations (Mishna et al, 2019), with criticism being levied at the reactive nature of existing guidance (Turner, 2016).

Yet at this time of unprecedented crisis, social workers have risen to the challenge of maintaining and building effective relationships using online technology, without any formal guidance or instruction. This discussion will explore the idea that using online communication tools, in conjunction with the practice wisdom of social workers, offers a promising possibility for building stronger relationships in a changing world.

We will use the term "social media" to refer to the online communication tools that can be used by social work practitioners. Our definition will encompass information and communication technologies that allow the user to engage, converse and communicate with others (Jackson, 2019) including, but not limited to, video conferencing tools, messaging apps and instant messaging facilities built into websites.

Rural location, poor transport links, physical disability and mental illness can all hinder a service user in attending a physical setting. Using social media in social work practice can remove physical and geographical barriers to service access. Research has suggested that this physical distance can increase self-disclosure in comparison with face to face interaction (Chan and Ngai, 2019. Tregeagle and Darcy, 2008). This could lend itself to a "foot in the door effect"(van Spijker et al 2014) reaching those who may not usually seek help (O'leary et al, 2013) and providing a strong foundation for future social work involvement.



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Critics of the use of social media within practice, however, have pointed to the emergence of new barriers and exclusions in the form of a "digital divide" (Mishna et al, 2019). Online learning provision during the Covid-19 lockdown period, for example, has highlighted a significant number of children who do not have access to the hardware or the internet connection to enable them to study at home (Coughlan, 2020).

We would argue that this digital poverty is an issue of social justice (Goldkind and Wolf, 2014) and should not be used as an argument to suspend or reduce online service offerings. Just as social work has historically campaigned for equality of access to physical services, we must now also turn our attention to equity within the digital realm.

This digital realm holds ever increasing importance for an expanding proportion of the population, with the emergence of a generation who prefer online communication to face to face interaction (Blakemore and Agllias,2020). Many relationships are now built solely online (Perron et al, 2010) and, if social work practice does not embrace this shift, it risks jeopardising the ability to establish meaningful relationships with a ballooning portion of service users (Turner,2016 . Best et al, 2014.). For many service users, particularly those in younger generations, the boundary between the online and offline world has become increasingly blurred. If our service users occupy both a physical and a virtual space (Carson and Stevenson, 2017), then we risk ignoring an important aspect of their lives if we do not engage with them on this level.

Offering the ability to access services via online communication tools provides a service user with choice and control over the interaction and this could increase participation (Symonds, 2018). The availability of online translation software could support service users for whom communication in English would be problematic in a face to face interaction. Turn taking within the online interaction can also be subverted, particularly if the online tool allows the service user to make the initial approach and this gives the service user equal rights to ask questions (Symonds, 2018).

Norms of communication and standards of language in the online world differ to verbal or written communication in the "real world" setting (Tregeagle

and Darcy, 2008). So called "text talk" and the use of emoticons offer the service user a level of communicative informality which may not be available in face-to-face interaction. This could begin to address the power imbalance inherent in the social worker-service user relationship if the practitioner mirrors this informality in their own responses.

Social work has been reluctant to embrace these advantages and therefore lags behind the use of online tools in comparison to the other helping professions, such as psychology (De Mesa et al, 2019). The profession has taken a defensive stance towards such tools due, in part, to fear of boundary transgressions and media scrutiny (Jackson, 2019). We would argue that social work needs to move towards a new conceptualisation of good practice, to incorporate online communication skills (Byrne and Kirwan, 2019). The continuous feedback loop of online communication (Chan and Negai, 2019) provides the opportunity for the social worker to mediate their response, and future guidance could focus on how to adapt communication skills to demonstrate empathetic understanding in the absence of audio-visual cues (Blakemore and Agliias, 2020). Social workers possess a vast number of transferable skills which are valuable for use online and this tacit knowledge can be exploited if coupled with an organisational culture which recognises the benefits of social media in building positive working relationships.

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Working better together: How do we build stronger relationships between social workers and people using services?

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In this essay, I will be arguing how social workers must have an understanding of the current issues service users are facing on a daily basis through empathy in order to build stronger relationships. I will be exploring how children and families social work practice has become individualised and blames service users for being in the situations they are in rather than understanding and addressing the structural factors that have an impact on their lives. This will be carried out by analysing how poverty is often ignored as having an important role in the struggles and difficulties many service users face and how poverty-aware social work is important in building strong relationships between social workers and service users.

Gupta (2015) highlights that children and families social work today takes place amongst severe budget cuts, increasing levels of poverty and inequality and a highly risk averse context, whilst referrals for children and families services are continuing to increase. Furthermore, Gupta and Lloyd-Jones (2014) argue that the focus of social work is narrowing due to contemporary government policy demonizing families in poverty and reducing support services. Hooper et al. (2007) suggests that poverty has a significant impact on making parenting more difficult, yet the current political context for children and families social work fails to address this. Gupta (2015) builds on this with her finding that the most common reason for children having social work involvement is due to neglect which is heavily associated with poor parenting caused by poverty.

The International Federation of Social Workers (2012) claims that social work is concerned with working with those in poverty due to the long history of working with the marginalised and excluded. Although, due to the current political climate of austerity measures, practice has become more individualised where social work with families ignores the wider socio-economic factors and pushes the blame onto individual family circumstances and behaviours. For example, Saar-Heiman (2019) argues that current practice has a key focus on parents being the ones responsible for the situation their children are in, although this ignores the social and political context in which parenting occurs. Saar-Heiman (2019)'s critical reflection through case studies highlights that coping with debt and coping with parenting are not separate challenges, as they intersect and have impacts on each other. Although, the current professional discourse that social work has taken does not address this effectively, therefore going against key social work values of social justice, human rights, and equality.



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Choices within the austerity agenda have had significant impacts on the welfare state, bringing

many reforms and changes for those who receive and need benefits. For example, the introduction of universal credit, the benefits cap, and harsher sanctions are just a few of the changes that have been made and has resulted in cases such as Errol Graham where his unfortunate death by starvation was found to be linked to changes in his benefits. (Butler, 2020). Furthermore, it has been argued that those in poverty that rely on benefits are suffering even more now with these welfare 'reforms' that were meant to improve their life chances and standards of living. For example, a paper reflecting 10 years on from the Marmot Review in 2010 (2020) has found that life expectancy has stalled and is in reverse for the most deprived women in society. This shocking finding highlights the extent of austerity and its' impacts on equity, standard of living and life chances for the most deprived. Social workers role in this with the current individualised approach we see in most child protection teams does not help children and families and creates more shame and blame on the families rather than supporting them to meet their needs and goals. (ATD Fourth World, 2004)

Poverty-aware social work can be seen in the collaboration of social workers working with anti-poverty charities such as ATD Fourth World. For example, BASW's collaboration with the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP) and ATD Fourth World to create the Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work. (BASW and CWIP, 2019). This guide enables social workers to understand poverty in all its forms by including people who have lived experience in poverty to empower their voices and ensure these are heard. The CWIP's research has identified that poverty is 'the wallpaper of practice' where poverty has a significant impact that most people social workers work with experience, yet this is rarely taken into account in practice, for example assessments of parenting capacity can be negatively perceived due to a lack of consideration of the impacts of poverty. (Turner, 2019)

How can social work claim to have values of social justice, human rights, and equality when service users are blamed for not providing for their children in the context of poverty they are suffering from? Social workers cannot build effective relationships with service users if there is blame directed towards service users when they are victims of harsh political

choices and agendas. In order for social workers and service users to work together and have stronger relationships that benefits all parties, social workers must be poverty-aware and tackle social injustices through a macro approach. Social workers must be agents of social change in order to truly advocate for the people they work with, and without this, the relationship between social worker and service user was never truly meaningful.

Gupta, Blumhardt & Fourth World (2018) suggest that a theoretical framework based on being more poverty aware through upholding social work values such as human rights and social justice may trigger a much-needed shift in children and family social work practice to reduce the individualisation and blame put on families we often see today. I believe that this change of being more poverty aware will enable service users to trust social workers as advocates for their struggles, difficulties, and injustices and in turn build stronger relationships between them.

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Working better together: How do we build stronger relationships between social workers and people using services?

Charlotte Pitt - Cardiff University

The relationship between social workers and those who use services has been described as both the "cornerstone" of practice (Alexander and Grant 2009, p.6) and the "heart of social work" (Ruch et al. 2010, p.1). When individuals are asked what is important to them when engaging with services, a recurring theme endures: the quality of their relationship with their social worker is paramount. Despite this consensus numerous commentators have emphasised the need to ensure this does remain at 'the heart', especially in the climate of austerity (Featherstone et al. 2014).

Whilst many points made in this essay may be relevant to other areas, the focus will be on social work with children and families. When researching this area it was impossible to ignore the interconnectedness between the personal and the environmental, the individual and the collective. To navigate this I have developed a model presented in Figure 1, loosely based on Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory.



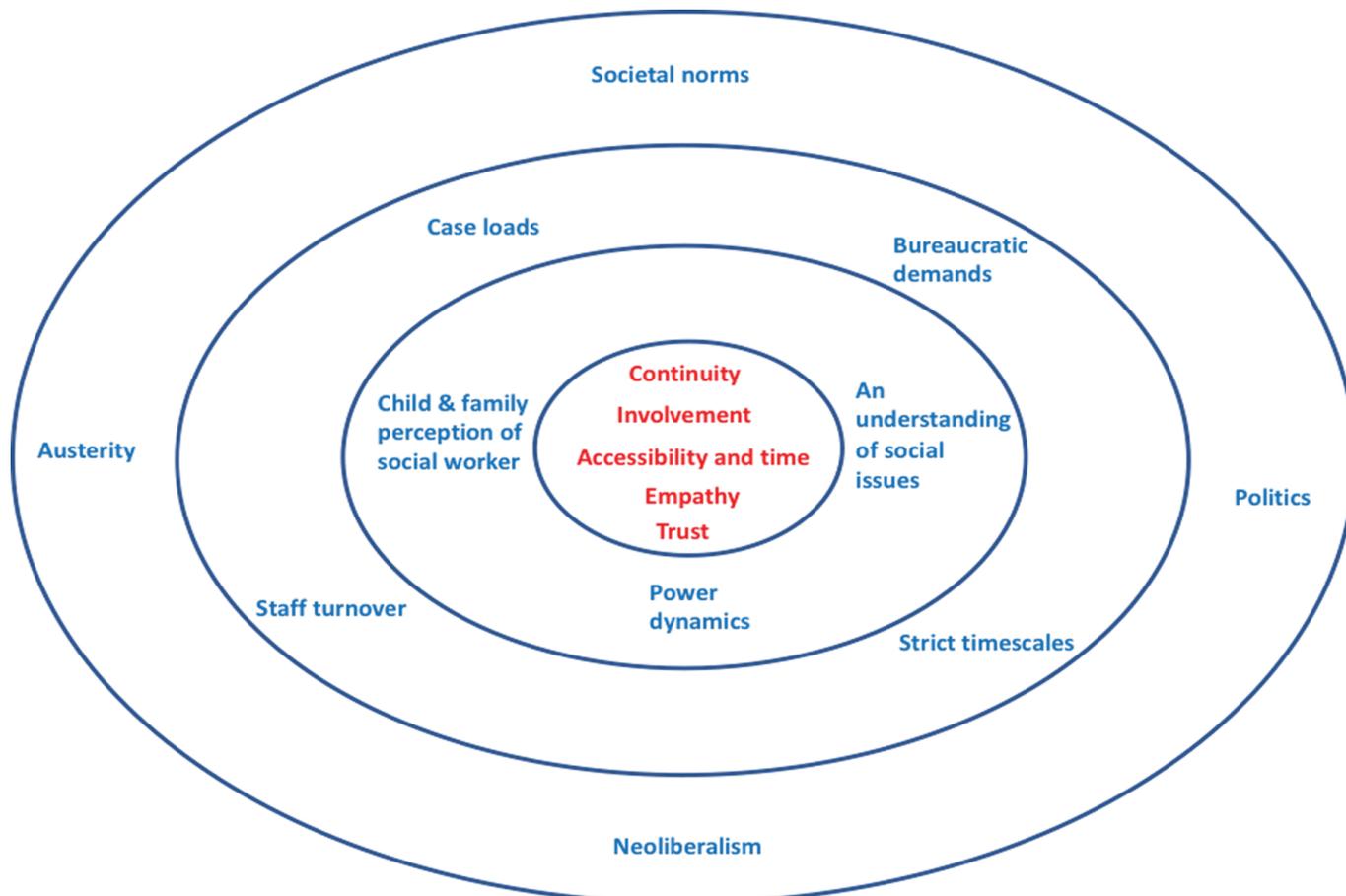


Figure 1: Model of factors impacting relationship-based social work

To address the question of how we build better relationships, I thought it would first be useful to consider what constitutes a strong relationship. The centre therefore represents the basic ingredients of a positive relationship as identified by children and families in various research studies (Ridley et al. 2013; Oliver 2010; Hill 1999). In essence children and families say they want their social worker to: stay the same (if it's positive), be around when they need them, to care about them, to have mutual trust and to involve them in decisions that affect them. I will discuss each of these.

Continuity

Having the same social worker is crucial if a meaningful relationship is to flourish. Unfortunately due to a high staff turnover we know this stability and continuity is difficult to preserve (Longfield 2018). Whilst more can be done systemically to address staff turnover is it important to acknowledge that we need to approach this issue in a relational way. To promote stronger relationships it therefore becomes important that relationships are seen as a 'phased process' making sure that transitions between one worker and another are not only limited but also caring and sensitive.

Accessibility and time

Relationships cannot be expected to grow if they do not have the time or if social workers are not available. This is affected by high caseloads, strict timescales

and bureaucratic demands (Ferguson 2014). An observational study following social workers on home visits to children on the child protection register highlighted how often the "system needs triumphed" over more compassionate work with families (Ferguson 2014 p. 289). As social workers we need to become more 'visible' by placing ourselves within communities. This again needs to be meaningful and adaptive to where people are. A good example of this is a recent pilot of social workers being placed within schools gaining further government funding (What Works Centre for Children's Social Care 2020). If relationships are forged this could make interactions with social workers the mainstream rather than a shameful and embarrassing experience for children. This community-based work could help to forge strong relationship with children, families and teaching staff. Additionally, direct work is often now referred on for specific agencies to complete which perhaps misses an opportunity for further strengthening the relationship.

Involvement

Involving children and families in decision-making about their own lives is considered central to effective practice (Diaz 2018). This is about working 'with' individuals rather than 'doing to'. A good platform for this to be enabled is Family Group Conferences (Brown 2007). It is important however that participation is encouraged in a meaningful way rather than tokenistic: not as a one-off but as part of a wider picture of involvement (Diaz 2018).

Empathy and trust

Empathy is about being able to understand and share feelings of the person you are supporting. Forrester et al. (2007) recommended the potential in social work adopting skills from the field of counselling in facilitating more empathetic work. Like the other elements listed above, trust in the social work relationship is affected by a number of wider factors. Many commentators agree that the media portrayal of workers as 'child snatchers' has negatively impacted public trust in the profession (Westwood 2007). Trust is closely linked to the second layer of the circle which highlights the psychological space in between the social worker and individual. For example a previously negative experience with social services may impact a family's initial willingness to engage. Having an awareness of these issues and by striving to understand and reflect on the social issues people are facing are crucial to relationship-based practice.

The wider picture

The outer layer and one concept in particular has featured throughout the discussion of barriers to relational practice: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be understood broadly as an economic theory which favours free markets, individualism, reduced public spending and privatisation (Spolander 2014). Private sector principles of performance indicators, cost-effectiveness and targets have been adopted by policymakers and enforced upon the social work profession. As shown the impact of this for relationship-based practice is significant with the increasing pressure on practitioners to meet deadlines, undertake assessments and meet targets instead of focussing on the 'quality' of the interaction.

To further address the question, I am proposing that to ensure relationships are placed at the 'heart' of practice we need to acknowledge the elephant in the room; politics. I agree with Fraser's et al. (2017, p. 1) proposition that "social workers need to re/politicize their purpose". To do this, avenues for change need to be forged. More integration between Universities and Trade Unions should be encouraged. Universities could go further than encouraging awareness and knowledge about structural factors and politics but support students think about ways in which this can be acted upon. Also, the linguistics of 'radical' social work may also want to be reconceived instead as 'standard' practice; there shouldn't be anything extreme about standing up for what is right. Perhaps if it is viewed as part of our role then it will seem more imaginable that wider change is possible.

Currently we are living through a global pandemic due to COVID-19 which has perhaps shone a light upon politics and how it directly affects us all. The tragic murder of George Floyd has invoked a series of protests and social media campaigns to challenge wider systemic racism that exists not only in the US but worldwide. Maybe now is the time for social workers to engage more with politics and structural inequalities that affect them and the people they are trying to support.

"Alone we can do so little.
Together we can do so much" (Helen Keller)

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Working better together: How do we build stronger relationships between social workers and people using services?

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Social work, though notoriously difficult to define, is a profession centred upon building relationships, fulfilling the innate human desire to help one another (Soydan, 2012). However, given its legally binding powers and duties, social workers are often caught between tensions, trying to uphold service users' rights, whilst executing the state's responsibility towards them, all under the scrutiny of the public eye (Horner, 2006).

Relationship-based practice is an approach utilised by social work practitioners that views relationships as the principal feature of social work and holds service users at its heart, although arguably there is little alternative, given that almost all social work is carried out via relationships. Relationship-based practice is traditionally rooted in psychodynamic theory, which seeks to understand how our previous experiences impact our relationships and thus how we manage our emotions, and is increasingly underpinned by the concepts of emotional intelligence, empathy and the practitioners 'use of self' (Ingram and Smith, 2018).

One would be hard-pushed to find social work literature that did not place relationships at the forefront of good practice, although the contemporary managerial context of practice, coupled with measures of austerity and gross inequality, increasingly inhibits practitioners' capacity to centre their practice upon relationship building (McColgan and McMullin, 2017). The worker-service user relationship is not straightforward like those naturally occurring with a family member or friend; embedded in this relationship are legislative and organisational constraints and an intangible yet undeniable power imbalance (Hennessey, 2011).

To build honest and constructive relationships with others, social workers must know themselves; this is known as 'use of self'. It is this self-awareness which allows social workers to relate to and engage the people with whom they are working, in a way that is true to their personal and professional values, providing fertile ground for the development of beneficial change (Hennessey, 2011), in line with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2012) Code of Ethics which states that social work is "focused on problem solving and change" and holds social justice and human rights among its core values.

Intrinsically linked to the idea of 'use of self' is the idea of understanding one's own emotions, or emotional intelligence. Emotions guide our reactions, behaviour and decisions and shape who we are. Developing emotional intelligence by understanding oneself allows

practitioners to think critically and manage situations that have the potential to trigger highly emotive responses which are common in social work (Ingram, 2015). Greater understanding of one's own emotions has been shown to allow better understanding of service user's emotions (Grant, Kinman and Alexander, 2014).

Empathy is another skill that allows for sound relationship building; it entails an appreciation of how another person is feeling, thus allowing for a greater understanding of their thoughts and behaviour (Howe, 2013). Interviewing is one of the most common activities undertaken by social workers (Kadushin and Kadushin, cited in Trevithick, 2012). However, for service users, an interview with a social worker may be daunting and evoke feelings of anxiety given the authority and power the practitioner's position holds. Recognising this fact allows workers to practice in a way which does not feel oppressive (Thompson, 2016).

An unquestionable majority of people who use services hail from less affluent areas (Cree and Smith, 2018). Beckford (2016), notes that those who live in 'underserved' areas, challenged by issues such as poverty, are at greater risk of developing mental health problems, and of becoming involved with the Criminal Justice System. Garbarino and Ganzel (cited in Russell, Harris and Gockel, 2008) consider poverty to be the 'principal villain' affecting parenting; the effects of poverty can often be seen to minimise parents' capacity to protect and look after their children, and is a common thread linking families considered more likely to suffer abuse and neglect. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) cite inequality as the common denominator of a multitude of social problems, including mental health, substance misuse and violence, and their statistically-informed argument is hard to counter.

The current neoliberal hegemony pervading our media and political climate would encourage us to believe that individuals should be held accountable for their problems which stem from their moral inferiority. Working in this way however, would potentially give rise to a largely punitive and risk-averse rather than welfare-focused way of working, devoid of the values so important to the social work profession, such as social justice and respect for individuals and could put workers at risk of ethical stress, which can occur when one's practice is incongruent with one's values (Fenton, 2016).



Utilising a radical social work approach can promote better relationships; recognising the impact that societal and structural disadvantage has upon individuals, families and communities, rather than holding people responsible for their own circumstances and marginalisation, helps people who use services feel understood (Lavalette, 2011). Ecological systems theory is also useful for understanding the way in which a person is affected by the environment in which they live (Stepney and Ford, 2000). Despite previously unseen levels of material comfort, Great Britain is currently one of the most unequal societies in the world (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Social workers must recognise that life is significantly harder for some through no fault of their own. By providing a voice and a platform for people who use services, social workers can utilise the privilege their position infers to challenge the barriers they face (Krumer-Nevo, 2016), in turn bolstering relationships by showing concern which people who use services notoriously desire (Lishman, 2009).

To build strong relationships with people who use services, social workers must firstly understand themselves; this enables them to better understand each person they work with, in turn allowing them to tailor their assessment and intervention according to each individual. Social workers must ensure their practice is neither oppressive nor discriminatory, by recognising structural disadvantage and inequality and their effects, and employing a non-judgemental attitude. Drawing upon sound personal and professional values as well as knowledge and theory ensures that positive relationships can be used to inspire positive change where and when it is needed most.

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