Relational Mental Health Social Work

A Position and Thematic Discussion Paper

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Foreword

The IASW endorses the practice of relational mental health social work and views the development of research and information to inform practice as a key social work task. Using existing opinions and frameworks the IASW will support social workers to develop social work specific practice tools.

We are appreciative to Emeritus Full Professor Jim Campbell and Kerry Cuskelly for compiling this discussion paper for social workers to use and further develop in their own practice.

Background

Mental health social work, mental health policy, and relational approaches are closely aligned through their shared emphasis on human dignity, empowerment, and the importance of relationships in promoting well-being. Mental health social work practice is inherently relational, grounded in principles of empathy, trust-building, and mutual respect (Ruch et al, 2018). This foundation is critical when supporting people and communities experiencing mental health challenges, as therapeutic relationships are central to recovery-oriented support.

Mental health policy in many countries has increasingly embraced recovery models. These models prioritise person-centred approaches, recognizing individuals as experts in their own lives and emphasizing collaborative partnerships in care (Slade et al, 2014). For example, the current national mental health policy in Ireland, "Sharing the Vision", emphasizes integrated and holistic care, advocating for support systems that consider social contexts and interpersonal relationships (Department of Health, 2020).

Relational approaches in mental health work emphasize the impact of early relationships and ongoing social connections on mental health outcomes. These approaches resonate with the mental health social work focus on understanding

people and communities within their wider social and relational environments (Trevithick, 2014). Mental health social workers, therefore, play a critical role in mental health systems, not only through therapeutic interventions but also by addressing social determinants of mental health, such as housing, employment, poverty, discrimination and social isolation.

The integration of relational and social approaches into mental health policy supports a shift away from biomedical models toward more holistic, person-centred care. This alignment strengthens the capacity of mental health social work to advocate for and deliver meaningful, sustainable support to individuals and communities experiencing mental distress, while also challenging structural inequalities that contribute to poor mental health.

Introduction

There are many reasons to appreciate and discuss the importance of relational approaches for mental health social work. Analyses of the social work profession point to the crucial use of the self in many interventions at levels of the individual, family and community. In many ways this becomes even more important because, unlike other professionals, social workers are not trained in the use of technologies and medication. It has also been argued that the knowledge and skills base tend to draw from the knowledge base of other disciplines in asserting social work professional identities. These complex issues of professional identity partly explain a growing interest in understanding how and why relationships are so important for social work generally and mental health social work. The following position paper discusses the principles and applications of relational practice, generally, before applying these in areas of mental health and mental health social work practice.

Defining relational practice

The origins and development of relational practice are somewhat contested. A common assumption is that relational practice can be partially understood in terms of psychoanalytical ideas that can inform interventions (Alessi and Kahn, 2019), and how such notions of personality development can affect, both positively and negatively, therapeutic engagements (Bordon, 2000). Ideas about relational practice also converge with other theory bases, for example the more recent interest in mindfulness, which have been applied to mental health and other social work settings (Turner 2009; Maddock et al, 2024).

There are a variety of perspectives (sometimes competing and contradictory) about the principles of relational practice. Winter (2023), for example suggests that notions of relational social work should be underpinned by an appreciation of issues of social change, justice, and human rights. This enables the practitioner to fully understand the context of everyday interventions and critically analyse simplistic assumptions about the use of the self. This broader approach can helpfully connect with relational approaches with other areas of social work knowledge, for example constructive, anti-oppressive and anti-racist social work. Thus, relational social work can be situated using broader systems analyses (Hanlon, 2024).

One way of operationalising these ideas is to identify principles that practitioners can adhere to in their interventions with clients. Folgheraiter (2017), for example states that relational social work implies a fundamental positioning in respecting humanity throughout the engagement with clients. Arguably a more difficult principle to deliver by practitioners is that of reciprocity, when, somehow, issues of professional status, power and identity are placed, at least in the background, during interventions. A related issue, the helper-therapy principle implies that social workers need to understand their own psychological mechanisms which may or may not hinder the relationship. As with other attempts to define relational social work, the author emphases the importance of wider structural and social systems which crucially inform the nature of the relationship.

A Scottish review of the literature (Ingram and Smith, 2018) highlighted a range of policy and practice contexts suggesting the need for relational approaches in social

work, including: the proposition that effective relationships are central to successful outcomes; that social workers need to understand the concept of the self in the negotiation of inter-personal boundaries; and that these considerations requires a radical shift for issues of power, agency and status to be addressed in interventions with clients.

An English briefing paper (DfE, 2025) reviewed the complex, interrelated theories that can help inform social work practice in this area. This included an important recognition of the enduring legacy of psychoanalytical principles drawn from the ideas of Freud and post-Freudians, particularly those of Melanie Klein. These can then be understood alongside notions of parallel processes that are used to reflect upon the social work role and its positioning withing various professional and managerial systems. The authors argue that it is crucial that, within these domains, the organisational commitment to relational practice, and the everyday use of thoughtful supervision arrangements can enhance relational practices.

Mental health services and relational practice

One of the key messages from the literature on how services should be delivered is the importance of the relational, across many situations. Beyene (2024), in their review of the literature, argue that the relationship between patients and mental health professionals is the cornerstone of all mental health treatment and is crucial for good therapeutic outcomes. They found four themes to describe relational competence in mental healthcare: the ability to self-reflect and self-regulate; having a genuine interest in understanding the patient; engaging in reciprocal interaction with the patient and meeting the patient so that they feel acknowledged. Crucially, they argue that these themes should be understood as an interlocking whole and that they should be evident in professional interventions.

(Boden-Stuart, 2024) confirms that the building of supportive relationships between clients, wider society and professionals is critical in developing good systems of mental health. Connectedness and the strengths of social networks create opportunities to challenge discrimination and enhance relational bonds. It is argued

that, in the context of mental health services, these may be stymied by the views and practices of mental health professionals who are often too focused on biomedical models and individualist explanatory theory. The authors appeal for alternative approaches that can help understand relational complexities that face people who use mental health services. This means drawing from a broader range of disciplinary perspectives, including experiential, community, clinical, and critical psychology; psychotherapy; and social psychiatry to improve the relational benefits of positive mental health professional practices.

There is increasing interest in how citizens experience mental health services. In an early study (Green et al, 2009) revealed how service users viewed the importance of enhancing social support meaningful relationships across networks. It is important, therefore, that mental health professionals shape practice to protect and grow the mental health of clients. Such messages are repeated in other literature. Grant and Mandell (2016) in their mixed method study of service users and providers highlighted common preferences for relationships that are supportive, flexible, and respectful, as well as focusing on crucial interpersonal boundaries that support but also undermine the impact of mental health services. It has also been argued that principles of trauma informed care, that involved relational forms of practice, should inform the broad range of mental health services, including community crisis and emergency interventions (Saunders et al, 2023).

Mental health social work and relational practice

Most of the literature on relational social work tends to focus on family and childcare services (Ruch, 2023; Ferguson et al, 2022), but relatively little on issues associated with mental health social work. Munford (2023), using the example of recovery based approaches, highlights the importance of relational approaches in delivering transformative social work practice. This implies the need for respectful and trust-based partnerships, involving critical reflection, that can lead to service users making decisions and determining their own recovery pathways. These and other arguments were tested in a study by Whitakker et al (2024). They used a cooperative inquiry

method to reveal complexities in the mental health social work role. The author argues that combining relational practice and advocacy skills with appropriate knowledge and expertise enables practitioners to navigate the evolving challenges of policy and practice in mental health services. As with other mental health professionals, service users often have a mixed experience of social work interventions. In one study (Wilberforce et al, 2020), service users felt that mental health social work was best when if focused on the whole life of the service users and not just an illness and that person-centred approaches were central to positive service delivery.

The needs of people with severe and enduring mental health problems are often addressed by mental health social workers. In an analysis of the literature on this topic (Bark, 2023), sought to explore person centred principles used by practitioner and highlighted the importance of building the types of personal and social relationships that the professional is well equipped to deliver upon. Grant et al (2021) carried out interviews with professionals, some of whom were social workers to ascertain what approaches work best with parents with mental health problems. They found that transparent, non-judgemental and empathic styles, where professionals were willing to share power and build authentic relationships were highly regarded by parents. They found, however, that professionals and organisations needed to enable a coherent understanding of the concept of constructive relationships to promote and build relationships with parents and families.

The growing field of trauma-informed practice suggests that relational approaches fit well with forms of mental health social work practice (Levenson, 2020) where client complexity, social context and therapeutic relationships are prioritised during interventions. Similarly, Knight (2015) explains how the working alliance can be used to address the long terms effect of childhood and other forms of trauma and that key social work skills are core to such relational practices. As discussed in the wider literature on relational practice, such interventions should not be viewed out with important social and political contexts. Thus, Woodlock et al (2022) describe how practitioners sought to locate and critique trauma-informed interventions that were undermined by the effects of neo-liberal organisational policies.

In many jurisdictions around the world mental health social workers carry out important legal mandates when using compulsory laws. In a recent study, Hemmington (2024) researched the role of approved mental health professionals (AMHPs) in England. Interviews with practitioners found that, as in other studies of the role, there were different approaches to practice with contradictory priorities. These highlighted the importance of relational approaches in contexts where the rights of citizens can be so easily compromised, particularly when community-based services are limited. The study echoes other messages from the literature: relational mental health social work cannot be understood outside wider social and political conditions, so it is important that the profession engages with and challenges systems that create barriers for reflective, relational practice. These findings are echoed in another study in this area. Abbott (2022) highlighted the many ethical challenges facing mental health social workers in carrying out these statutory roles when engaging with clients and families. He argues that the voice of the person being assessed needs to be amplified, given their marginalised position at a time of crisis, and that relational approaches are important in gaining trust and ensuring human-rights orientated practice.

Challenges to relational social work practice

Despite the positives and opportunities for using relational social work approaches, it is important to be aware of limitations. As discussed above, some of the literature acknowledges the need for systems-based analysis in understanding and delivering such interventions (del Mar Fariña and O'Neill 2024). Where such analysis is absent, there is a tendency to adopt simplistic, individualised approaches with clients. Thus, Quinn and Grumbach (2015), using critical race theory, argue that therapeutic engagement with women, should be carried out with a full realisation of issues of race, gender and culture. Karban (2017) has argued that health inequalities perspectives often missed in mental health social work practice. One way of addressing important structural issues is to position the practitioner in space that 'faces both ways' to account for important, individual relational issues but contextualised in an analysis of social inequalities. This notion of bridging the gap

between how mental health social workers use relational approaches to access the internal world of the client, and wider societal construction or causation mental problems is discussed by Dunlop et al (2022) in their analysis of practice with gender minority communities who are at risk. They suggest that creating space for thoughtful storying telling can have positive effects to help service users and professionals understand ways in which structural discrimination has adversely affected perceptions of identity and community and what changes might be possible in the future. At a time of international concern about the mental health needs of people who are displaced and seeking asylum it is important to consider the strengths and limitations of relational social work in these areas. Field et al (2021) point to the many legal and administrative restrictions that adversely affect the lives of individuals, families and communities, and appeal for inclusive, strengths-based approaches.

Conclusions

This position paper underscores the fundamental importance of relational approaches for mental health social work. Relational practice supports effective mental health social work, guided by core principles focused on respecting humanity and building supportive relationships. This in turn can support the delivery of high-quality mental health services that are responsive to service user needs and experiences, including in complex areas like trauma-informed care and statutory roles.

The effective practicing of relational mental health social work demands a critical understanding of the broader social, structural, and political contexts that shape people's and communities' lives and contribute to mental health challenges.

Mental health social work is well-positioned to integrate these relational approaches with a critical, systems-based analysis to provide holistic, ethical, and human rights-focused support, challenging both individualistic perspectives and oppressive structures. Further development and application of relational mental health social work requires ongoing critical reflection and engagement with the complex realities faced by people and communities within the wider social system.

Summary

1. Ideas on relational social work have a long history but are becoming mainstream in contemporary practice.

2. Several theoretical traditions contribute to our understanding of relational social work, including psychoanalysis and mindfulness.

3. Although some of the knowledge base is contested, a number of core principles are discernible.

4. Most applications of these ideas occur in fields of family and childcare social work.

5. There is increasing interest in exploring the importance of relational approaches in the delivery of mental health services.

6. Mental health social work appears well placed, professionally, to apply and further develop relational practice.

7. It is important to critique simplified notions of relational practice and build theoretical links to broader structural forms of discrimination that adversely affect the lives and mental well-being of people.

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