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## **The Influence of ‘Self’ on Building Relationships in Social Work Practice: A qualitative study**

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### **Introduction to the Research**

One of the aims of social work research is to “contribute to the development and evaluation of social work practice and services” (Shaw and Gould, 2001, p. 3). Having always had an interest in the ways we act and interact with each other, I found this to be a compelling area of study. As human interaction forms the basis of social work, I feel that it is important to understand how practitioners use the *self*<sup>40</sup>, e.g. personality traits, values and beliefs, in practice. In this article, I argue that listening to the experiences of practitioners can highlight the ways by which the worker/client relationship and the development of trust are influenced by the practitioner’s *use of self*. Where I refer to social work practice, I use the phrase ‘worker/client relationship’ to signify work with the parent/carer of a child in a child protection setting.

In the following section, I will explain my aims, objectives, rationale and research questions. In sections 3, 4 and 5, I will review the most current literature in the area and relate it to the relevant strands of this discussion. Section 6 addresses my

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<sup>40</sup> Within this thesis, the word(s) *use of self/self* is *italicised*, when used as part of the concept of *use of self*, except where an author or research participant uses *use of self/self/myself/yourself*.

conceptual framework, which forms the basis for my primary research, which is discussed in sections 7 and 8. To conclude, I will highlight the relevance of my primary research.

### **Research Design**

In carrying out this study, I combined a review of relevant literature with primary research. I interviewed four experienced child protection social work practitioners, in relation to their experiences of the influence of *use of self* on the worker/client relationship. This qualitative study encompasses their current understandings of *use of self* as a concept and the relation of this to a representation of *use of self*, as outlined below. My research explores the influence of the practitioners' *self* on the worker/client relationship and on the development of 'active trust' (Giddens, 1994). In this context, I take 'active trust' to refer to a form of trust that is earned, rather than implied or taken for granted by a practitioner.

### **Aims & Objectives**

The overall aim for this study is to determine the extent to which a practitioner's *use of self* assists in building 'therapeutic alliance' (Chapman *et al.*, 2003) i.e. the worker/client relationship and 'active trust' (Giddens, 1994). This will be achieved by discussing practitioners' education/training and their self-awareness, which come together to form the *self* that they present to their clients. Through analysis of data from semi-structured interviews, I explore four practitioners' views in relation to *use of self*. A secondary aim is to add to existing literature in terms of a practical understanding of practitioners' *use of self*. My objective is to present *use of self* as distinct from psychodynamic theories of countertransference and self-disclosure. I present *use of self* as a concept that relates to a practitioner's personality traits, values and beliefs in social work practice relationships (Edwards and Bess, 1998).

### **Rationale**

Weinberg (2007, p. 213) states that the *use of self* is "one of the thornier and more elusive concepts in practice, often undertheorized and assumed [but that] the self is the central vehicle in the therapeutic relationship". Heydt and Sherman (2005, p. 25) argue that social work is unlike any other profession, helping or otherwise, in that the "representative instrument or primary practice tool used in the profession" is not

easily identifiable. This is because social workers have to look to themselves to identify the instrument of their practice. They must explore the ways in which they use themselves in the development of an effective helping relationship (Sudbery, 2002). Heydt and Sherman (2005, p. 25) assert that “social workers themselves are the instruments of the profession” and this gives credence to the notion that *use of self* is a topic worthy of debate within social work practice.

A final consideration in choosing this research topic is the recognition that, while a vast amount of literature is available in relation to *use of self*, much of it does not pertain directly to social work practice. In light of the fact that social work practitioners’ *use of self* is under-researched, my study explores *use of self* as it pertains directly to social work practice.

### **Research Questions**

This piece of research set out with four research questions<sup>41</sup>; however, only question three will be discussed in this article.

1. To what extent do child protection social work practitioners understand the concept *use of self*?
2. To what extent do they use themselves, e.g. personality traits, values and beliefs, in their practice?
3. Does *use of self* influence building relationships in practice?
4. How do practitioners develop forms of ‘active trust’ in their relationships with clients?

### **Literature Review**

Overall, I found that *use of self* is well researched, though much of the literature does not pertain directly to social work. Mandell (2007, p. 2) highlights a similar difficulty when she states that ‘a search of Web sites of North American schools of social work shows “use of self” frequently listed as a topic in a range of courses, [yet] no texts specific to social work can be found on related reading lists’. She further highlights (2007, 2008) that while the personhood of the practitioner is central to social work, there is a dearth of literature in this area. She asserts (2007, 2008) that the gap in the

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<sup>41</sup> A full discussion of these four research questions can be found in the version of this thesis as submitted to UCC and stored in the off-print library.

literature becomes apparent when the psychotherapeutic emphasis on countertransference fails to address certain important aspects of the practitioner's *use of self*. Prominence is given to countertransference, where "only one edited text focused on "use of self" in a sense broader than countertransference" (2007, p. 2). This is reinforced by Rossiter's (2007, p. 22) contention that *use of self* has been seen as a "clinical social work concept" and as such, has been referred to in the context of countertransference.

Mandell (2007, p. 5) asserts that *use of self* "seems to be one of those taken-for-granted terms". This claim is supported by Dewane's (2006, p. 543) assertion that "[u]se of self is a concept that is universally accepted yet equally ambiguous". Dewane (2006, p. 544) further states that: "[u]se of self has been primarily discussed in the clinical social work literature against the framework of the psychodynamic theories that have influenced our practice". Mandell (2007, 2008) makes an invaluable contribution to this area of study, by addressing *use of self* as it pertains to social work practice relationships. In her 2007 work, practitioners from various social work contexts contribute to the discussion of their experiences of *use of self* in practice. Carlton (2008) speaks of Mandell's contribution to the topic as a redefinition of a previous narrow understanding of this concept. Carlton (2008, p. 249) states that: [i]n recent years... thinking about social workers' relation to the 'self' has revolved around understanding the social positioning of the worker in relation to his/her clients in order to identify and purposefully minimize situations of power imbalance. She presents Mandell's (2007, p. 249) work as "establishing the relevance" of broadening this conceptualisation of *use of self*. This is similar to what I have set out to achieve in undertaking this piece of research.

The concept of *use of self* is relevant to social work practitioners in a number of ways. The first is a practical understanding of practitioner's *use of self* and the second is in relation to the influence of this on the worker/client relationship. Carlton (2008) asserts that Mandell's (2007, p. 250) work "does not provide guidelines or define the specific steps that one should follow in order to engage in a critical use of self". Rather, Mandell (2007, p. 250) invites her readers "to be witness to and learn from...first person accounts". This is an aim that I share with Mandell, which I set out

to achieve by conducting semi-structured interviews with experienced child protection social work practitioners.

### **Understanding *Use of Self***

Mandell (2007, p. 5) states that the term *use of self* is not consistently applied in the literature, but that it is referred to within the concept of “personhood of the worker”. For the purposes of clarity within this discussion, I will apply the term *use of self*. Each contributor to Baldwin (2000) presents “an aspect of how they use themselves in therapy” (Kramer, 2000, p. xvii), to propound the notion that practitioners are not limited to using techniques or theories, but that one can also use the *self* in practice. Howe’s (2008, p. 185) assertion that ““use of self” is a key aspect of relationship-based practices” is one that drives this piece of research.

Mandell (2007, p. 4) states that the term *use of self* can mean different things to different practitioners and that this depends on their “theoretical orientation...; their experience in education, practice, and supervision; and the focus or extent of their own personal awareness”. This diverse range of connotations necessitates the use of a definition to focus my interview participants.

### **Representing *Use of Self***

In order to fully explore my research questions, I have chosen a focused definition as the central point of my literature review, as well as the starting point for my primary research. Edwards and Bess (1998, p. 90) provide the frame of reference for the concept of *use of self* as it is presented in this thesis. They argue that:

the application of what you know as a psychotherapist (that is the accumulation of knowledge and techniques from professional education and training) can only be helpful and effective if you are aware of how who you are as a person in the room with the client (that is the accumulation of your own personality traits, personal belief systems, and psychology in the relational matrix with the client) is influencing the therapy.

This representation of *use of self* highlights the influence of a practitioner’s personality traits on the worker/client relationship. In support of this, Kramer (2000, p. xv) describes the responses of clients in relation to the effectiveness of their

therapy, as determined by “the personality of the therapist”. Further, Powell (2001) states that elements incorporated into this concept have a wide range “from communication skills, insight, and self awareness, [*sic*] to beliefs, values, and attitudes” (Powell, 2001, p. 3).

### **Building Relationships**

Sheafor and Horejsi (2003, p. 69) speak of ‘conscious use of self’ as the intentional use by the worker of “his or her unique manner and style of relating to others [in] building positive helping relationships” with clients. They posit this as “fundamental to social work practice”. Heydt and Sherman (2005) support this by stating that a practitioner’s *use of self* has an influence on the development of effective helping relationships. They emphasise “self-awareness as a foundation to understanding the role of conscious use of self in the development of effective helping relationships” (Heydt and Sherman, 2005, p. 26).

Cree and Davis (2007, p. 151), through their research into social work practice, using the voices of service users, carers and practitioners, found building relationships to be a key element of practice. They echo the attitudes of previously discussed authors when they state that:

[i]n order to build relationships with others, social workers must also be prepared to reflect on who they are and what they are bringing to their social work practice; they must be aware of the impact of themselves on others.

Cree and Myers’ (2008) work found that using the knowledge and experiences of service users, carers and practitioners, we can come to understand the meaning of good practice. This work illustrates that one of the characteristics of good social work is that it is fundamentally about building relationships.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A researcher’s conceptual framework underpins their chosen research approach. To construct a framework within which research and analysis can take place, one has to question how they make sense of the world (ontology). Further to this, one has to explore their conceptualisation of knowledge (epistemology). Examining my beliefs about the world has led me to the construction of a framework for this study that is

consistent with my beliefs. It has also assisted in uncovering the data collection method most suitable to my research aims and objective. This framework is visually represented below. This diagram shows that my ontological perspective is that of constructivism, my epistemological perspective is that of idealism and that I am grounded in an interpretive phenomenological approach, utilising a qualitative method



*Figure 6.1* Visual representation of path from ontological perspective to method

A constructivist approach to *use of self* is one that emphasises the diversity of experiences and the different meanings people attach to these experiences. In this case, I am interested in the meanings, which participants attach to *use of self* and how they experience this in their practice. An idealist approach is taken, which seeks to access the experiences of social actors and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences. The goal of this approach is to explore people’s lived experiences and ascribe meaning to these in accordance with their construction or interpretation of these experiences. Further to this, an interpretive phenomenological methodology is consistent with the use of semi-structured interviewing as a data collection instrument. For this study, which aims to explore the individual’s personal experiences, a qualitative data collection method is employed. This takes the form of semi-structured interviews, incorporating elements of the narrative style, which allows participants to speak freely regarding the topic of *use of self* in their practice.

My interview guide consists of open-ended questions that are focused in relation to my research questions. I have highlighted that much of the literature concerned with social work practitioner’s *use of self* is concentrated on topics of congruence, countertransference and self-disclosure. Powell (2001, p. 62) found her data to represent “vast discussions of generalities” in relation to the above-named topics, as well as those of practitioner self-care and theoretical orientation. She recommends that further study concerning *use of self* would benefit from refinement by exploring



this topic within a narrow context. Based on this recommendation, I designed my interview guide in such a way that practitioner's experiences of *use of self* and the meaning they ascribe to these experiences is under exploration. To achieve this, I provided an opportunity for participants to engage with a representation of *use of self*. In this way, I maintained a narrow focus in my interviews, thus limiting the extent to which this study addresses congruence, countertransference or self-disclosure.

I began each interview using my prepared interview guide. In keeping with the narrative style of interviewing, or "phenomenographic research" (Bowden and Green, 2010, p. 125), I bracketed my perspective by controlling my interjections while each participant was speaking. I ensured that I made a mental note of statements, to which I wished to return, picking this up at the end of the interview. In utilising the narrative style of interviewing, I attempted to encourage my participants to say everything they could about the topic by use of "neutral questions" (Bowden and Green, 2010, p. 128).

### **Findings**

In this section, I present excerpts from four semi-structured interviews, which were conducted for this research in order to elicit the views of experienced child protection social work practitioners in relation to how the worker/client relationship is influenced by the practitioner's *use of self*. My findings represent the personal views, values and beliefs of a small number of practitioners. The excerpts contained within this section are presented in accordance with my methodology. During the discussion of responses, I take account of the ways in which they are (dis)similar from the literature, some of which has been discussed. In the interests of protecting the confidentiality of my participants and their work setting, each participant has been assigned a pseudonym and all identifying information has been removed. The pseudonyms are as follows: Rose, Lily, Holly and Violet.

Rose and Violet specifically referred to honest, clearly communicated feedback as influential in the development of worker/client relationships. They echo Lily's sentiments above when they emphasise the importance of practising in a way that is consistent with their personal values. Both Rose and Violet spoke about using a



‘phrase’ in practice, which assures the client that they are being upfront and honest with them.

I think we have to be honest...even if the client doesn’t like what you have to say and I always say that: ‘you might not like what I have to say, but I’m being upfront, I’m laying my cards on the table, I’m not being sneaky, I’m not going behind your back’ (Rose).

I would often use a phrase to break bad news or things that could be perceived as very conflictual, I would say: ‘I think you have a right to know what I’m thinking...I will be writing about this in the file but you have a right to know so I’m telling you now and it might not be easy to hear’ (Violet).

Rose noted the influence of honesty on her relationships with clients:

I think honesty and clarity is incredibly important even if you...piss them off basically. You might damage a relationship for a short period of time...if families are...to look at their problems honestly and address them, you need that honesty. They need it from us and we need it from them, because we can’t get places with somebody if they have no insight into their difficulties.

Violet spoke about addressing obvious differences between her and a client in an attempt to build a relationship with them, e.g. her name, “because it is not an Irish name or an English name” and her age,

I would be aware of my age and make comments on that...you know in a joking way with teenagers...because I would be their grandparents’ generation now.

Lily stated that, when going out to meet someone for the first time, her presentation and awareness of *self* are important in terms of building worker/client relationships. Later in her interview, she stated, “I know the way I am, I know my personality”, indicating that self-knowledge has assisted her in developing a way of working with people that is consistent with her *use of self*. She also spoke about the importance of having an awareness of values in building worker/client relationships based on respect and working together to improve the situation. The following excerpt reveals the role of her strong belief in equality when she comes to building relationships with clients:

it's how you are, it's how you present yourself, how you carry yourself and it's about having that awareness...not going in saying 'I'm the social worker, I'm better than you...you're an alcoholic/homeless'...just going in there and saying 'ok we're on the same page, the same level but at the same time, this is my role...this is where you're at and we need to work together'. So I think definitely, if I didn't have an awareness of myself, I don't know, I can't imagine how it would work, effectively anyway...how you'd be able to build any sort of relationship.

Holly's contribution is similar to Lily's, when she refers to self-knowledge as having assisted her in developing a way of working with people that is consistent with her *use of self*. She stated,

it probably comes back to a personality thing and what your way is with people in general...how you make them feel comfortable...you're fundamentally trying to find more out about [clients]...I think what you're doing in using yourself is you're setting it up so you can [do] that...the only way you can...is to make them feel comfortable and get them into a place where they feel safe...to talk. You absolutely use yourself in that because you will use whatever your personality is to do that...to help people...relax.

Holly agreed with Lily's view that *use of self* is used in building worker/client relationships and in 'moving forward' with the work. For Holly, this is fundamentally based on

mutual understanding, respect and working towards where you need to get...you can't not use yourself in that, I mean, how would you not? It just doesn't work that way.

Rose commented that 'giving of herself' and using her "sense of self" in her work has enabled her to develop positive worker/client relationships.

I think that when I've appropriately shown myself and used my sense of self, I seem to get further with clients in that we...develop a better working relationship.

Rose's contribution to the discussion, in terms of an "appropriate client/social worker relationship" is discussed here.

### **Appropriate Relationships**

Building on her earlier comments, Rose went on to state that ‘giving of herself’ has to be done within an “appropriate client/social worker relationship”. Elaborating on what is appropriate in terms of the worker/client relationship, she commented

you’re not out to make friends and you’re not there for that, but at the same time, I’m a strong believer that you have to give a little bit of yourself, of your personality. Sometimes I’ve worked with people and thought ‘if I’d met them in a completely different life, we might have been friends’, because you can pick up that you might have a similar sense of humour, there might be similar personality traits, but it’s important to acknowledge that you can’t give people an easy time because of that, because you might identify a little bit with them.

This is an important concept and one that social work practitioners must always bear cognisance of, as the worker/client relationship can be difficult to navigate. This is especially so when, as Rose noted, social workers seek to ascertain quite personal information from clients. When clients disclose, the worker must be mindful of their professional role and respond appropriately, yet in a way that fosters on-going communication by the client. Although Rose did not, Violet specifically mentioned her professional role, which is discussed here.

### **Professional Role**

It is interesting that only one participant directly spoke about the professional social work role. Violet asserted that communication “probably creates the basis for [relationships] in some ways but I think the professional role is much stronger in creating that, initially”. She spoke of her preference for maintaining a professional role. Within this, she would refer to her experiences as opposed to personal information. She would self-disclose if she felt it would be effective in a particular situation with a client.

part of my professional role is that I get on with what I have, the experiences and knowledge that I have and sometimes I would refer to my experience as a practitioner...I would say ‘in my professional experience, this is what happened before and maybe there are similarities to your situation’...The longer you do the job, the more situations repeat themselves.

### **Research Questions Answered**

This piece of research set out with four research questions. Here, I will provide an overview of the data I collected. Further to this, I will analyse my findings in relation to each research question.

- To what extent do social work practitioners understand the concept *use of self*? My research illustrates different interpretations of the concept of *use of self*, showing that practitioners tend to attribute their understanding of the concept to their social work education. Violet expressed that she had encountered this concept, in terms of the once dominant discourse in relation to self-disclosure, when she was undertaking her social work training. Lily expressed that she has knowledge of this concept, as it is something that had been introduced to her while she was undertaking her training, in relation to reflective practice and self-inquiry. She spoke of the influence of this self-inquiry on her self-awareness in terms of her values and beliefs, which further influence her client interactions. Lily revealed that, for her, *use of self* is about having an awareness of personal experiences and relating to other people's issues. This reflective and self-aware *use of self* is seen as a strength and is connected to the healthy development of the professional self (Mandell, 2008; Urdang, 2010). Lily and Holly placed an emphasis on the influence of personal and professional experiences on their practice. Rose referred to the human aspect of social work, acknowledging the role of her personality and human reactions in her practice. Rose, Lily and Holly revealed that their values and beliefs have a significant role in the ways they approach client interactions. This is consistent with the finding that practitioners are not limited to using techniques or theories, but can also use the *self* in practice.

- To what extent do they use themselves, e.g. personality traits, values and beliefs, in practice?

The responses obtained in the course of my research show that, in a meaningful way, practitioners use their personality traits, values and beliefs in practice. It is significant that, while Rose, Lily and Holly acknowledged the role of their personality traits in practice, Violet did not. Rose and Lily spoke about having an awareness of their personalities as central to their practice, while Holly spoke of personality as fundamental to her client interactions. Rose spoke about her personality and human

reactions as a significant element of her *use of self* in her practice. Lily expressed that she did not think she could carry out the day-to-day work without having an awareness of her personality and the ways it influences her practice. In contrast to this, Violet voiced her feeling that the *use of self*, in this sense is “neither here nor there” when dealing with a crisis situation, rather that the professional role is stronger in creating the basis for a positive worker/client relationship. All participants noted the extent to which they use their values and beliefs in practice; however, this discussion is relevant to the following research question.

- Does *use of self* influence building relationships in practice?

All participants agreed that there is a strong link between building relationships in practice and *use of self*. My research has found that communication based on the values of equality, honesty, openness, understanding and respect are instrumental in building relationships and in ‘moving forward’ with the work. Lily spoke about a standard of cleanliness in a client’s home, which due to her upbringing, did not match her personal standard. Nevertheless, she appreciated and respected the efforts made by the client to reach that standard. She feels that use of her values and beliefs about client interactions has had a positive influence on this relationship. This is consistent with the finding that a practitioner’s *use of self* and self-awareness both have an influence on the development of effective helping relationships (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2003; Heydt and Sherman, 2005; Cree and Davis, 2007). Rose and Violet spoke about using a ‘phrase’ in practice, which assures the client that the social worker is being upfront and honest with them. Again, this is consistent with their individual *use of self* and illustrates the importance of developing a practitioner style that is in keeping with the *self* of the person, i.e. a style that feels natural and comfortable.

- How do practitioners develop forms of ‘active trust’ in their relationships with clients?

My research has found trust to be complex in nature, with Violet noting many aspects to the development of trust and Holly debating whether ‘trust’ is an appropriate term to use in describing the worker/client relationship. Violet, Rose and Lily explained that ‘active trust’ is developed in worker/client relationships, by *use of self*, i.e. values and beliefs. This is consistent with all previous findings and supports the links

between *use of self* and building relationships based on honesty and openness that are conducive to the development of trust.

### **Concluding Comments**

At this point, I would like to add Rose and Lily's concluding comments, as they illustrate the resounding importance of *use of self* in social work practice.

I think we're seen as child-snatchers, but what I find, is that use of self is really important then, because sometimes I do say to families. 'I'm a social worker but I'm not a robot, I'm a human being, I do get moved by things, I do have compassion'. I think bringing your own personality traits into it can break that down after a few sessions. So you might crack a joke or something...you become more relaxed, they become more relaxed and you might get further with them.

Lily's concluding comment was a stress on the importance of *use of self* on managing in the role of a social worker. She stated,

I can't imagine how you would manage or how you would keep going if you didn't have that awareness of yourself, in any of the work, if it's even working with other professionals, anyone. You need that awareness of yourself.

This qualitative study explores the influence of *self* on building relationships in child protection social work. This was achieved through a combination of secondary and primary research. The overall aim for this study was to determine the extent to which a practitioner's *use of self* assists in building 'therapeutic alliance' (Chapman *et al.*, 2003) and 'active trust' (Giddens, 1994). This has been achieved by discussing practitioners' education/training and their self-awareness, which come together to form the *self* that they present to their clients. Through analysis of data from semi-structured interviews, I have explored four practitioners' views in relation to *use of self*. A secondary aim was to add to existing literature in terms of a practical understanding of practitioners' *use of self*. My objective was to present *use of self* as distinct from psychodynamic theories of countertransference and self-disclosure. I have presented *use of self* as a concept that relates to a practitioner's personality traits, values and beliefs in social work practice relationships.

I have argued that listening to the experiences of practitioners can lead us to draw conclusions in relation to how the worker/client relationship and the development of trust are influenced by the practitioner's *use of self*. It further answers research questions concerned with the extent to which social work practitioners 1) understand the concept *use of self* and 2) use themselves, e.g. personality traits, values and beliefs, in practice. Two final research questions elucidate 3) the influence of *use of self* on building relationships in practice and 4) how practitioners develop forms of 'active trust' in their relationships with clients. The themes 'understanding *use of self*', 'building relationships' and 'developing trust with clients' emerged from the four participant interviews, are analysed and represented within this article. The analyses of these themes provide insightful and profound answers to the above-mentioned research questions. The findings from this piece of research are relevant in reflexive practice, which is concerned with a continual examination and evaluation of the *self* in relation to an individual's social work practice.



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