Third Giving Poverty a Voice Social Worker Training Programme Study Group
Thursday 23 October 2014

*This study group featured special guest Baroness Ruth Lister and focused on applying her theory of poverty, human rights and the 'politics of recognition&respect' to discussions about social work practice. See **Appendix 1** for a summary of her presentation delivered to the group.*
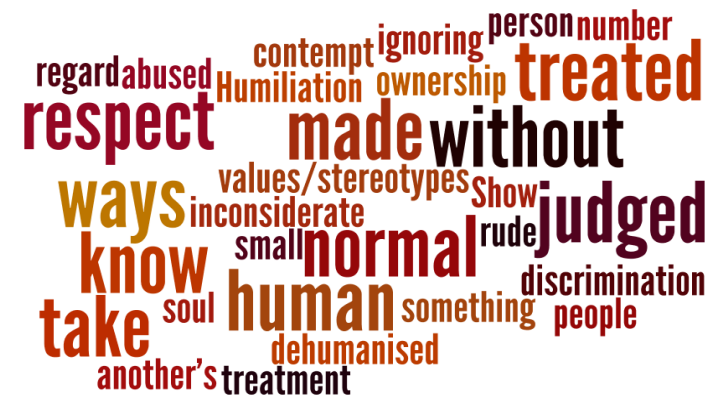
RESPECT

OPPOSITE OF RESPECT

Group Exercise
What do the words 'RESPECT' and 'RECOGNITION' mean to you and what are their opposites?

RECOGNITION

OPPOSITE OF RECOGNITION

Why do we want to see recognition and respect and the promotion of human rights in social work practice?

… because all people should be treated with recognition and respect: Social work should recognise and respect people and their human rights because doing so is a foundational part of *"normal interaction"*. Family members called for this recognition of a shared humanity - to be *"treated as an equal"*, *"to be seen as who we are in our own right"*, *"not to be judged"*, *"to be respected by social workers or other people the same as they would expect me to respect and recognise them... because I'm a person and a human being."*

… because it is what social work is for: Promoting human rights and recognition should already be at the core of the social work. As one academic argued, as an ostensibly *"promotional profession"*, social work should be about *"human flourishing… to help people to survive, to thrive'"* rather than *"surveillance and monitoring"*.

… because it is necessary to avoid isolating people in need of support: Disrespectful services can be isolating, particularly for families turning to social services because they have nowhere else to go. Services that recognise and respect those people are important for ensuring they feel supported by society. As one academic noted: *"social workers are perhaps one of the most intimate relationships they have with the state, and it's someone who has a lot of power over them… if that person is not treating them with recognition and respect, what it's doing to their self-esteem, their sense of themselves, regardless of the success of the social work relationship, is actually terribly damaging. It's reinforcing all the negative stuff they're seeing in the media or hear politicians talk… Whereas if actually you've got at least one person in authority that you feel is on your side and who does recognise you, that actually can be quite a turning point…"*.

… because respecting these principles lead to better social work outcomes: Respect, recognition and human rights are the *"foundation of the relationship"*, without which *"there will never be successful social work"*. These principles help to build trusting and constructive relationships with families. Even if decisions made during the social work process are not necessarily what the parent(s) wanted, they are at least more likely to accept them and not feel disempowered if they were recognised and respected in the process.

On the flipside, disrespectful social work practice hampers the attainment of positive outcomes. One practitioner noted observing that *"Some people are so ground down by bad treatment that it doesn't occur to them that they should be treated with more respect, it's just occurred to them that this is how they are treated. There is an acceptance… when there has been a sort of repeated pattern..."* In such situations, where individuals internalise their treatment and subsequently disengage, it becomes harder to build working relationships, undermines cooperation or disincentivise families from coming forward even when they are in need of support.

… because human rights create a standard of accountability: Human rights and the ideas of respect, recognition and dignity are recognised by national and international influential bodies, as well as academics. Confirming them as expected standards for social workers to uphold creates an extra layer of accountability by which the treatment of families can be monitored, while reinforcing these principles in social worker training encourages self-regulation. Furthermore, promoting these principles in the public sphere shifts the emphasis from blaming people for situations they find themselves in towards a greater onus on social workers (and other professionals) to uphold people's rights when they are violated by circumstances such as poverty.

What aspects of recognition and respect (or their opposites) come up time and again in relation to social work practice?

Treatment stemming from 'othering': Failure to promote recognition, respect and human rights can stem from the 'othering' of people in poverty. If you believe (consciously or unconsciously) that the individual with whom you are working is somehow 'different' or 'less worthy', it is impossible to treat them respectfully because you do not see them as your equal. Participants raised examples of treatment stemming from 'othering' behaviour, including **a lack of empathy** and endemic **double standards**.

Family member perspectives

… unless it's part of the training and social workers realise that the person walking in to them is already scared of them, protective, panicking for their children – unless they know that, they don't understand the human reaction – you know they think "why's she so aggressive?" Because I'm bloody terrified they are going to take my children away! It's normal, it's not abnormal.

… you learn to adapt better the more you sit round the tables but your emotions get the better of you in that situation, it's personal. And I do think that it's really hard for social workers to understand that side of it because a lot of the time they've never been on that side of the fence but equally it's hard for parents to understand what it's like for a professional because they haven't been on that side either.

A lack of empathy

A frequently cited example was social workers' lack of appreciation that certain decisions, processes or behaviour can be interpreted by parents as 'attacking' or provocative and a concomitant inability to recognise parents' emotions or responses in such situations as normal (instead misinterpreting these responses as emotional, defensive, aggressive, detached etc.) Meetings where parents were not spoken to directly or included were cited as occasions when this occurs.

Double standards

Many participants pointed to double standards in social work practices and systems that create the impression that different expectations are held for people in poverty in comparison to others in society. Participants identified the different levels of value that seemed to be placed on families' time and professionals' time, recounting experiences of social workers cancelling meetings and home visits without providing notice or reasons, or setting tasks that were not followed up on. One family member said *"they do put a lot of things in place that they don't then explain why they had you doing it and it can be very… you feel a bit taken the mick out of."*

Practitioner perspective

"When the families talk about this double standard, we don't understand it. It's not theory, it's everyday life, what everybody else takes for granted – they don't get it. And when they go to hospital, it's not safe anymore… When they go to school… When they go to social services, everybody is hurting them, it's hurting them. There is no more safe place for the poor. And I don't know if people realise that."

Family member perspective

"The slightest mark and I took him to the surgery, treated like a criminal for quite rational, reasonable things - kids fall over, they bash themselves. The next thing I know, I'd got a social worker hammering on my door like the flaming gestapo…Yet when they took my son into care, the teacher took hold of him and hit him and then I kicked up a fuss and it was completely disregarded and the marks on him completely disregarded. So that's quite common… I think, across the board. There are very much double standards."

Further examples of double standards related to expectations about how parents should raise their children versus the way that children are treated by social services. One participant noted the irony of being told she was providing a 'chaotic' life without stability for her son who, once taken into care, was moved eleven times in the first 3 years and never received any assessment of his special needs or educational support. Comparisons were also made between the way injuries or marks on children in their parents' care were scrutinised versus the way similar marks were disregarded after children were taken into care, as well as anecdotal discrepancies between how these issues are followed-up for children

of wealthy/middle class parents versus low income parents. One participant compared what happened when her daughter broke her leg in foster care with the intrusive way she was treated in hospital after her son was hurt falling on a chair with a nail: *"The way the two incidents happened and how they were handled were so different. No one went to check on my child when she broke her leg. No social worker went to check that foster care placement because she was a foster carer and "we trust what she says"."*

Violation of the right to a family life: Family members believe there is a lack of recognition about what happens after social work interventions, such as the taking of children into care and the way that it violates the right to family life. Families felt the reality of broken families and the impact on parents was overlooked. They also stressed a lack of recognition of the negative outcomes faced by children who have been in care, as well as the impact on sibling and wider family relationships. While the right to a family life is not absolute, questions were raised about the proportionality of limitations of that right in some circumstances. For example, one family member whose children were taken into foster care noted that despite making significant changes in her life, social services still refuse to allow her children to return home on the grounds that she might be unable to cope financially. It is questionable whether housing restrictions or material deprivation should be legitimate reasons for infringing one's right to family life.

Lack of recognition of family circumstances: Participants felt social services do not consistently recognise circumstances that are out of families' control, such as the complexities of poverty, and often misinterpret symptoms of these unrecognised circumstances or blame families. As one academic noted, in relation to a specific case, she felt the parent had *"been blamed or that her and her children are being punished, as you said, for things. But I think that blame around people for their poverty is very insidious because its causal factors are not unpicked… What more could she do? Because she can't change the material that's going, that she's sort of rooted in."* Another participant spoke of being described, on her first visit by a social worker as *"living a chaotic lifestyle rather than getting my act together… incapable of learning, improving and doing the best for my children"*, despite having just left a violent relationship, miscarried from moving and was living in wholly new circumstances, under a benefit system she was unacquainted with in a half-way house.

Lack of recognition of efforts made, changes and progress: Participants complained of social services' apparent inability to recognise and appreciate a family's progress and change over time. In some cases it seems that greater weight is placed on a family's history, as present in written reports, rather than changes that have occurred since those reports were written. This shortfall is often

accompanied by failure to praise for progress made. One participant noted *"… even when there is recognition for the families, I find it very hard for a social worker to admit it and to say it. A good example is [name redacted], they were seeing her every day, they stopped, they didn't come and say "You've improved, you've done this so well and now we will come once every 2 or 3 or 4 weeks", they just vanished!"*

Misrepresenting people and not respecting knowledge: Families noted that meetings where they were included or made to feel as if they had something to offer to the decisions at hand made them feel recognised and that their own knowledge was respected and valued. On the other hand, families cited feeling disrespected by notes and records that did not accurately represent them or their situation. This feeling of disrespect was amplified if those notes were used against them in proceedings and if their subsequent objections to the content were given less weight than that of the professionals or simply not believed.

"When the person says, "no, that's not what I said" or "the context in which you have written is not correct"… they're not believed and that's a complete lack of respect because there is an assumption that what is written, the writer, was correct, that they didn't come with any kind of view as a person when they wrote what they wrote…"

Communication breakdowns:

"…keeping up communication seems to come into it as well because that's a way of recognising and respecting..."

A sense of being disrespected also arises when social workers fail to communicate adequately with families on a range of matters, including expectations, deadlines and timescales, as well as substandard explanations of families' rights and responsibilities in any given situation. Poor communication can be seen as disrespectful because it makes families feel that they are being kept in the dark or are not worth being updated on important matters. Social workers need to know that these feelings can arise even if there are no bad intentions on the part of the social workers (i.e. the lack of communication is an omission stemming from overwhelming caseloads and time pressures.)

Practitioner perspectives

"… quite often what I come up against is that social workers aren't able to properly express to families what their rights and responsibilities are. So, for example, if you work with children in need and children at risk, it's about being able to explain to a family "well, actually if your child is a child in need then it's optional that you come and work with us and this is the premise upon which we are working with you and we would really like to support you but if you don't want in then that's your choice and however if we do this, it becomes less optional and if you chose to do that you can but we may take this action". I think quite often this just doesn't get explained enough."

"I've seen lots of initial visits where I've been shadowing and thinking "you haven't said why you're here"… you've said "we've received a referral" but that doesn't mean anything to a real person. And so what I think we need to be saying is "the school have said they are worried about this and because they've said they're worried about this we have a duty, we have to, come to see what we understand is the situation".

Are the 'politics of recognition&respect' and human rights <u>practicable</u> as frameworks for social work practice?

The social work system makes it difficult to systematically uphold recognition, respect and rights. Many of the shortfalls raised above stem from flaws in the system, such as case overloads, spending cuts, target-driven, risk-averse work and tick-box exercises that make it hard to offer a tailorised and conscientious service. As one practitioner noted: *"when you're working in an organisation, I think that the organisation has a certain power that may not be respectful and may not promote that respect and I think that's a real struggle for some very good practitioners who are perhaps not as good as they could be given the environment".* Other participants agreed and pointed out that social workers who provide more respectful services often have to do so by bending the rules or in the face of pressure from managers. As a result *"… there needs to be a culture too of developing that kind of empowering ethos into social work and not punishing social workers for trying to have a human rights approach to the families they are working with."*

Practitioner perspectives

"The thing about doing good social work is you have to have time – it's not something you can do quickly."

"I've been out with families and I hope that I respect them and listen and take good notes but then I get back to my office and I can't make the changes that I think need to happen."

"I see a lot of social workers who I think are potentially very good social workers and actually they're not treated with recognition and respect. So they're working in an environment where they're hot-desking, sometimes they've got nowhere to sit… just in an open plan noisy environment… social workers have to go out into quite vulnerable situations, go into family homes, they have to draw on their emotional resources and their theory, all that kind of stuff and then go back into an environment where they're treated appallingly, in my view."

The current political climate is not favourable to human rights (for example, a will to repeal the Human Rights Act). Furthermore, disrespectful treatment of people in poverty and blaming them for issues beyond their control is rooted in societal perceptions that need to be addressed much more broadly. Without a wide focus, even if we make shifts in social work practice *"you're coming across possible barriers in attitudes or thinking in other areas, whether it's in healthcare or education or whatever."*

"I'm quite a new social worker… and I have learnt from some of the more seasoned people who've been doing the job for a long time and moved around different roles that with experience sometimes you can really hold on to those values of the way that you treat people in your work. [Name redacted], you gave us some examples last time that you were here about when you are chairing case conferences about how you work with family and how you sit down with them before and after the meeting and involve them in a way that is as respectful as it possibly can be within that process."

Ways Forward?

Despite structural systemic limitations, **critically reflective practice** can still help individual social workers develop respectful practice on an 'in-person' level.

Critical thinking can be better rooted at the **social work education** stage, challenging ideas, ideologies, policies and processes from the perspective of what students see the purpose of social work to be.

Social workers also need to see it as part of their role to constantly **critique the profession** and policies that have the effect of fostering disrespectful outcomes.

Look more closely at where we can **use human rights language**. For example, when social workers go into households and make assessments, any concerns could be framed as human rights needs rather than 'risks', which is blaming language. Practically speaking, developing a tool-kit for social workers to use in their practice, which could be heavily rooted in human rights principles.

Make structural changes, such as the **exceptional Lewisham model** of having an advocate that works with the family. The model helps break down some of the communication barriers while having someone who has experienced the system being involved really helps with issues surrounding lack of empathy.

Influence

Influence for Lister's theories on poverty derived from organisations, like ATD, that are "committed to the participation of people experiencing poverty" as well as Lister's own involvement in the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, which featured strong representation by people living in poverty on the panel.

Understanding poverty

*"**Poverty has to be understood as a relational, as well as a material phenomenon**. In other words, that it's experienced in relation to other people, both in terms of everyday interactions, including with officials and professionals and in relation to the wider society, including politicians and the media. Poverty is experienced as a shameful and corrosive social relation, as well as a disadvantaged and insecure economic condition. This can include a lack of voice, disrespect, humiliation, an assault on dignity and self-esteem, shame and stigma, powerlessness, and diminished human rights and citizenship."*

Poverty as a relational experience is closely linked to **the notion of 'othering'** (i.e. a process whereby people in poverty are represented and treated as something 'different' to those who are not poor). This otherness is not an inherent state (people are not born 'other') but they are created 'other' through an ongoing process put into motion by the non-poor, including sometimes academics and social workers.

Recently, in an important book on child protection, Brid Featherstone and Kate Morris argued that the processes of 'othering' families and individuals in adversity is having a profound and pernicious effect on the relationship between child and family, social work and families themselves, and through the state and the intimate spaces of relationship.

'Politics of recognition&respect'

Recognition
The **'politics of recognition&respect'** was heavily influenced by 'Recognition Theory' and its development by American social theorist Nancy Fraser. Fraser talks about symbolic injustice, indicating injustice stems not just from an unfair distribution of resources, in particular money, which requires a politics of redistribution (i.e. we need more money), but also from the ways in which members of some groups are talked about and represented, how they are treated and how their voices are not heard. Redressing that requires a politics of recognition.

Relating this specifically to poverty, Mark Peel found that from talking with people in poverty "their **justice is intimately connected with dignity and self-determination**. Justice is about being respected, trusted and listened to because what you have to say was important. If social justice is a response to poverty, they argued, it must be a response to poverty's psychological and emotional wounds, not just its financial consequences".

In Fraser's terms, **achieving this justice is about recognition**; recognition as a fellow human being of equal worth and recognition of human dignity, regardless of individual circumstances. Another American theorist, Charles Taylor, argues that recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people, it is a vital human need. Indeed, it is probably one of the most basic human needs.

Respect
Respect is also crucial for achieving justice. As the leading sociologist Richard Senate puts is "lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended. He or she is not seen as a full human being whose presence matters." Adapting Nancy Fraser's formulation of the politics of recognition to include respect as well is useful because it better reflects that language of respect that people with experience of

poverty are more likely to use. But it also better fits with the demands of poverty activists because generally a politics of recognition is identified with the assertion of group difference or identity (so it might be women, LGBT groups, disabled people, black and minority ethnic groups), i.e. "proud to be…" whatever it is. But the last thing people in poverty want to be is treated as different, instead, their struggle is the recognition of the common humanity, dignity, and equal worth and equal rights that flow from that. And that brings us to the potential roles of human rights.

Human Rights

A human rights ethic requires, first, reframing the way we think and talk about poverty and secondly, framing concrete demands for social rights.

Reframing the way we think and talk about poverty

- **Human rights counters that dominant process of othering**, because in essence, they are about what we share and have in common as human beings, rather than about what separates us and because at the heart of human rights is respect for the fundamental dignity of all human beings.
- **Non-discrimination** is a principle of human rights. That is important when the process of 'othering' can be made worse when poverty interacts with other social positions such as gender, disability, race or ethnicity.
- Human rights counters the growing tendency to see the causes of poverty as lying in individual behaviour (what you do as an individual) rather than the structures of power and the economy. As argued by Donald and Mottershaw in their JRF report "**the language of human rights shifts the burden of the responsibility for poverty off those experiencing it**, focusing instead on the role of duty-bearers, especially the state."

Framing concrete demands for social rights

- While "proud to be poor" is not a banner under which many people want to march, **marching under the banner of human rights**, which is in essence saying that poverty is nothing to be ashamed of, makes it easier to stand up and be counted as poor.
- Human rights also provides a way of **framing demands for social and economic rights**, such as an income, be it through wages or benefits adequate to enable people to live in dignity and decency.

Human rights in practice

- The human rights framework is not just about the substance of social rights, it is also about **how those rights are delivered** and more generally how people living in poverty are treated in their everyday interactions with the state in the person - be it benefit officials, teachers, social workers. Mel Bartley, in a study of resilience and the factors that contribute to it notes that "the message that users are not valued and indeed mistrusted permeate many facilities in hard-pressed areas. It's not just a degrading physical environment, too often, the way the services are provided is disrespectful of people's lives and experiences." She highlights in particular, not being listened to. She argues that "treating user-groups and individual clients as a legitimate source of welfare wisdom and incorporating their views is essential" and that is a philosophy that used to underpin many Sure Start programmes.
- On the face of it this might not seem to have anything to do with rights as such, but about the simple courtesies in relating to service users, the simple politeness. In many ways it shares the philosophy with what has come to be a fashionable notion of relational welfare which rightly puts great emphasis on **the quality of the relationship and interaction** between service-users and providers. But without an underpinning by that core human rights principle, a genuine

acknowledgement of the fundamental equality and human dignity of those users is all too easy for treatment to be anything but genuinely respectful.

- The Equality and Human Rights Commission has argued, the **development of a human rights culture in public services** can provide an ethical framework for the actions of public authorities. Properly understood and applied, it can have a transformative function. But it requires a change in attitude and culture.

Barriers to human rights

- The language of human rights does not resonate at present in this country due to opposition to the concept amongst the Conservative side of the Coalition Government, a disappointing lack of receptivity demonstrated by the previous Labour Government and public detachment because of a perception that human rights are linked with groups "even less popular than people living in poverty".
- A Joseph Rowntree Foundation study reported fears that rights-talk can be seen as overly adversarial or legalistic and money for lawyers is quite often talked about.
- A rather different warning is against the co-option of human rights from a kind of managerialist rather than emancipatory ethos. For example, in the mechanistic tick-box type statements about treating people with dignity and respect. One gets the sense that no one had really thought through what that means, either as an ethic or a practice.