

Relationship-based practice – some fundamental principles

Social work is essentially about relationships: first and foremost with service users; but also with social work colleagues and colleagues from other professional backgrounds – health, education, police, to name a few; with the organisational context and wider policy context of practice; and finally with ‘the self’, or oneself. These relationships do not exist in isolation from each other and are interrelated and exert influences on each other.

What do we mean by relationship-based practice?

As already stated, relationship-based practice is not a new phenomenon (Ruch, 2005). Relationships are central to social work practice but are shaped by the nature and purpose of the intervention, whether the relationship is the primary means of intervention, i.e. ‘the end in itself’ or, as it is more commonly utilised, as a ‘means to an end’ (Network for Psycho-Social Policy and Practice, 2002), and the timescales involved (Ruch, 2005). Definitions of relationship-based practice are hard to come by but it is closely related to and builds on psychosocial approaches to practice and the psychodynamically informed case-work tradition (Hollis, 1964). The central characteristic of relationship-based practice is the emphasis it places on the professional relationship as the medium through which the practitioner can engage with and intervene in the complexity of an individual’s internal and external worlds. The social worker and service user relationship is recognised to be an important source of information for the worker to understand how best to help, and simultaneously this relationship is the means by which any help or intervention is offered.

- The model of relationship-based practice we are proposing has several core characteristics:
- It recognises that each social work encounter is unique.
- It understands that human behaviour is complex and multifaceted, i.e. people are not simply rational beings but have affective – conscious and unconscious – dimensions that enrich but simultaneously complicate human relationships.
- It focuses on the inseparable nature of the internal and external worlds of individuals and the importance of integrated – psychosocial – as opposed to polarised responses to social problems.
- It accepts that human behaviour and the professional relationship are an integral component of any professional intervention.
- It places particular emphasis on ‘the use of self’ and the relationship as the means through which interventions are channelled.

What these characteristics imply is that relationship-based practice involves practitioners developing and sustaining supportive professional relationships in unique, complex and challenging situations. An important but not necessarily explicit implication arising from this model is the need to reconceptualise not only the nature and behaviour of service users but also of professionals. This model places equal importance, therefore, on the unique and complex nature of professionals and the rational and emotional dimensions of their behaviours. This is often referred to in social work literature as the professional ‘use of self’. As a social worker one of the biggest challenges you will face is being able to simultaneously focus in professional encounters on what is happening for the service user and what is happening to you. By developing this ability to understand holistically the service user’s and your own responses to a specific situation you will ensure you are acting in the service user’s best interests.

Source: From: Wilson K., Ruch G., Lymbery M. and Cooper, A. (2011) (eds) *Social Work: An introduction to contemporary practice*, Pearson, Harlow, pp. 7–8.