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## COMMENTARY

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# Theory, research and practice in child welfare: The current state of the art in social work

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## Abstract

This paper aims to utilize social theory to inform relationship-based social work practice with children, young people and families. We see 'direct relationship-based working' drawing on theory and evidence as best placed to take forward high quality, humanistic social work practice. We outline the problems with policy and practice development led by the latest high profile 'scandal' or by the overemphasis on experimental design and systematic reviews. This issue was highlighted during a recent debate about appropriate methodologies for exploring Family Group Conferences: the debate is explored as illustrative of our concerns. A flexible model is proposed, which draws on eclectic sources of evidence, social theory and professional knowledge. We propose some principles for a reflective, humanistic and responsive form of social work professionalism.

## KEYWORDS

academia, child protection, evidence, family support, relationships, social work

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article explores the state of the art in social work practice with children and young people in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The article outlines some the current challenges including the key tension between family support and child protection, the problematic utilization of evidence and the impact of the academic community on theory and practice. The case is made for the centrality of the relationship-based practices in social work, and some creative ways forward are suggested.

## 2 | THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORK

Although there is some resurgence of interest in the importance of relationship-based working in early prevention and child welfare (McGregor & Devaney, 2019; Trevithick, 2014), it could be argued that the focus on child protection continues to overrate influence in

policy and social work delivery, which in turn dictates the direction of travel in social work practice. Alongside this, many of the current programmes for intervening with children, parents and families experiencing adversity, which are often deemed as 'novel' and 'ground-breaking' approaches, can be viewed as reforming previous versions of comparable interventions. This is particularly the case in parenting programmes (Sanders, 2008) and direct work interventions in schools (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). The situation is further complicated by the pressure to evaluate outcomes, a focus that often underplays the emphasis on process and relationships in social work. This emphasis can be seen in the work of organizations such as the Early Intervention Foundation and the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (the What Works Centre from here forward). These debates take place amid disagreement on what is deemed as conclusive evidence swayed by what is the preferred 'gold standard' randomized control trial (RCT) studies demonstrating outcomes (Axford & Morpeth, 2013) ahead of more pluralistic measures of success, including the importance of coping (McGregor, 2019) and of a process based in the building of sustainable relationships. This tension

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was illustrated by a recent debate between the What Works Centre and a group of academics: a debate explored in more detail later in this article. The final tension discussed here relates to ongoing analysis by the academic community who sometimes focus on critique founded solely on social theory orientated commentary, rather than being evidence-based or drawing on the undertaking of empirical research to ground the arguments raised (see Garrett, 2016 and Parr, 2009, for example). All in all, these factors—family support versus child protection, recycling of programmes of intervention, and lack of agreement of evaluation frameworks coupled with over-criticism not supported by actual research—continue to potentially undermine both the social work profession and, more importantly, the development of national and international systems for the betterment of the lives children and families living with adversity.

The key factor that overrides the aforementioned debates and tensions is the need to retain a strong value on relationship-based social work practice and a revaluing of relationships as the core function of humanistic working in the field of child welfare (Race & O'Keefe, 2017). Just as it has been argued that the emphasis on procedures and outcomes has come at a cost of eroding social workers' capacity to have and give time to service users and the fear that they are perceived as doing social 'policing' rather than social 'work' remains dominant (Bilson et al., 2017). Relationship-based practices should not be viewed through a 'top-down' lens, as Meagher and Parton argue, practices need to 'recognise and affirm practitioner self-understandings and aspirations and service-user evaluations of service quality' (2004, p.18). These subjective and qualitative viewpoints need also to be taken into account in the research process. Engaging at this level of communication between worker and service user is underpinned by relationships based in esteem, resilience and worth, something we argue cannot be automatically assumed. Finally, this positioning of relationship-based social work and inclusive practice needs to stand outside of programmes and overtheorizing in academia, which sometimes does not relate to the reality of working in the field. Similarly, the assumption that relationship-based working is only really possible in family support and not in child protection social work practice needs to be constantly challenged based on decades of evidence to the contrary (e.g., see Thompson, 1995 and Jack, 1997).

### 3 | SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN

Social work contains within it many tensions, including those between caring and controlling, intervention and non-intervention, supporting and protecting, 'doing with' and 'doing to' being among these. These binaries are played out in the tension between supporting families to look after their own children and taking action to protect children from the actions, or inactions, of parents. How this tension is deployed in practice helps to explain why social work with children and young people is complex, demanding and sometimes controversial (Frost, 2021).

We argue here that family support, in most nation states, has been overshadowed by child protection. The reasons for this

straightforward to perceive: child deaths or safeguarding seemingly 'gone wrong' (as was the case in reference to child sexual exploitation in England between around 2006 and 2015) become headline news in the way that family support never can. The role of the media, and the subsequent political reaction, has been expertly outlined in the English context by a number of authors (see Parton (1985) on Maria Colwell, who died in 1975, and Jones (2014) on 'Baby P', who died in 2007). We can see the how events often unfold: first, there is a child death, or other abusive act. This is necessary but not sufficient—in England, for example, there are around 70 child deaths related to child abuse and numerous abusive events per annum but relatively few become headline news: thus, to make headlines. other factors have to be present. Second, there needs to be a perception that something has 'gone wrong', often that a professional has been negligent. But again, this is not enough as something is seen as going wrong in almost every Serious Case Review (SCR) that has been published. Third, and these events seem to have an almost random nature, something happens to trigger media attention—perhaps a court case (often London based), an alienated parent going to the press or a journalist taking a particular interest in a case or in a geographical area. Then, to use Cohen's (2002) notion of 'moral panic', a process of amplification takes place; there may be repeated headlines, speeches in parliament and/or online campaigns or petitions. Again, using the moral panic model, there are calls for 'something to be done'—new legislation or disciplinary action against a professional, for example—so that 'that this will never happen again'. After a time, the public profile will subside—sometimes to be reignited if a similar case occur following publication of an official report or if a comparable incident occurs.

These cases tend to drive policy: in England the Children Act, 2004, the formation and later abolition of Local Safeguarding Children Boards, the appointment of the Chief Social Worker, the foundation of the Frontline training scheme are among the many initiatives whose roots can ultimately be found in a child abuse 'scandal' (Frost, 2021; Frost & Parton, 2009). There are many faults with this 'scandal' led method of policy making which we go on to explore.

#### A. How do high profile cases emerge?

As we have argued above the cases that have led policy [notably in England Victoria Climbié and 'Baby P' (Peter Connelly)] are not representative of safeguarding work or even of the 'worse' cases, they are simply those which hit the headlines and which politicians felt they had to respond to. It is not a good policy process, nor 'evidence-based', to focus on this small number of cases and allow the perceptions of what happened in those cases to dominate policy and practice development.

#### B. Why are successes underplayed?

The process of basing policy development on a few cases that are perceived as having 'gone wrong' also tends to underplay the vast majority of cases where things 'go right'. Public and political awareness of such positive cases is low, and none appear on the front page of the newspaper or have led to a ministerial statement.

### C. Why has a blame culture emerged?

A blame culture has resulted from this 'things have gone wrong' form of policy making. Jones (2014) outlines one extreme example of this—the pursuit of Sharon Shoesmith, who was the Director of Children's Services (DCS) during the high profile Baby Peter case. The search for errors is a difficult and often fruitless process—child protection is a complex, multidisciplinary process where outcomes cannot be easily predicted. Apart from a very few cases, where professionals may have acted negligently or unprofessionally, it is not helpful to seek to blame people who have dedicated their lives to working with neglected and abused children.

The issue here then is a lack of evidence-based policy making—there are plentiful sources of well-conducted research (see [www.researchinpractice.org.uk](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk), for example)—but this tends to be ignored when policy is driven by scandals and/or short-term political agendas. However, there are also problems with evidence-led policies when evidence is utilized in a 'robotic' or unreflective manner (see Canavan et al., 2016)—an issue we explore further below.

## 4 | REFLECTING ON THE USE OF SHORT-TERM AND MANUALIZED INTERVENTIONS

There has been a powerful trend over the last decade towards strong evidence-led policy making this is exemplified, for example, by the Early Intervention Foundation. One problem is that these evidence-led approaches tend to draw on syntheses of research evidence—known as 'systematic reviews' or sometimes as 'rapid reviews'—which are then used as a basis for policy and practice developments (the Early Intervention Foundation website provides numerous examples: [www.eif.org.uk](http://www.eif.org.uk)).

The issues with using these reviews as a basis for policy include the following:

1. The application of inclusion and exclusion criteria for coverage in the reviews can exclude many relevant articles. A typical example is as follows: 'A systematic search of the literature identified over 7,000 articles. Following a rigorous selection process, 108 studies were retained for detailed review, reflecting the impact of 83 specific programmes or practices' (Sim et al., 2020, p. 8). Given that many of the excluded articles will have appeared in peer-reviewed journals, it seems that a lot of useful knowledge is excluded.
2. The excluded articles will often be qualitative ones that give a voice to children, young people and other service users: this method then seems in danger of excluding the authentic voice of service users.
3. The exclusion criteria often underplay the role of theory and privilege RCTs and quantitative studies thus skewing our understanding of complex programmes.
4. Programmes and short-term interventions are more likely to have evaluations attached and thus benefit from inclusion in systematic or rapid reviews, to the detriment of more universal (and harder to measure) policies.

5. As the approach in the United States is more programme-based and less universal than in the United Kingdom, the rapid review method tends to privilege the US literature. This is strange given that the United States tends to come towards the bottom of international welfare 'league tables'. A 2020 UNICEF report placed the United States 34th out of 36 countries in terms of child well-being (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020).
6. Rapid reviews tend to exclude professional/practice knowledge that we all tend to use to inform our practice—in particular as we move from 'apprentice' to 'expert status'. Why then exclude these forms of knowledge in this context?

The focus on systemic review and RCTs creates a tendency towards manualized, standardized programmes can be seen in relation to parenting for example. For example, three programmes dominate in the parenting field (Frost et al., 2015):

- The Incredible Years Programme developed and evaluated by Webster-Stratton and Taylor (2001) and delivered initially in the United States to parents of children aged 0–8 years. The Incredible Years Programme draws on cognitive and social learning approaches, with a focus on 'positive parenting' facilitating the children's development and helping to manage any behavioural difficulties. The range of methods used include video-modelling, teaching behaviour and conflict management and, in some settings, separate 'Dinosaur' classes for children that encompass social, emotional and problem-solving skills.
- The Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme) was developed in Australia. It is an intervention that can be used at different levels, which relate to the needs and of the child. The key objectives of Triple P are to improve parental confidence, self-efficacy and self-regulation. The programme is underpinned by both cognitive and social learning theories and addresses expectations and positive methods of discipline. Participants learn skills that help to manage both their parenting practices and work towards becoming independent problem solvers (Sanders, 2008).
- The Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC) programme was developed in the United States, to support minority ethnic groups. The programme aims to improve parent-child relationships, to promote positive forms of discipline and to increase participation in the community and healthy lifestyles. The programme explores how cultural and faith-based beliefs influence families functioning. Child development is explored work that is informed by both social learning and ecological theoretical approaches (Steele et al., 2000).

These are all evidenced and manualized programmes that now have significance influence across much of the English-speaking world (Frost et al., 2015). There is a debate and tension between advocates of these manualized programmes and more far-reaching, universalist approaches (see Wolfendale & Einzig, 2012). The targeted, evidence-led approaches tend to have technicist goals (e.g., to 'fix' the parents) that are in turn in danger of stigmatizing participants: universal

approaches clearly have a larger reach, are less stigmatizing, but can be more expensive to implement. It is argued here that universal programmes are more suitable as every parent finds parenting to be a challenging role and thus requires support: there can hardly be a more important issue for how we organize of social programmes than ensuring that parents fully supported in the crucial task of raising future generations. Furthermore, issues of cultural competence on the part of professionals, such as social workers, and in terms of appropriate fit for interventions tends to be overlooked (Husain, 2006).

Wider family support research is in danger of being dominated by two discourses: one theme being around neurological research and the other around the use of RCTs as a methodological approach and their collation in systematic reviews. We question the applicability of these two approaches (see Frost et al., 2015, for an extended discussion of this). We argue for a more flexible, nuanced and inclusive approach to family support research and that this should be connected from the social context of family support. There is a clear role for qualitative studies, which tend to emphasize relationships and process rather than a focus on measurable outcomes: we are wary of 'technicist' approaches that reduce complex human processes to a technical 'fix' and measurement. Moral and value-based judgements quite properly are required around family support: it is essentially a human process and therefore requires moral, nuanced and humane reflection as well as 'scientific' debate.

## 5 | THE ROLE OF RESEARCH—DEBATES ABOUT METHODS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Taken at its most basic level, a core and ultimate function of social science theory and research is to perform a social good for humanity and, in particular, for people who are oppressed in any way and thus should build on what Burr (1995, p. 13) described as the 'liberatory promise' of antiessentialism and social constructionist perspectives. Burr argues that taking a moral stance by grouping issues such as poverty, racism, social exclusion and discrimination as part of a form of social relativism in isolation, without in-depth understanding, is not helpful. Similarly, we argue here that there are central issues around the moral compass, role and function of academia in relation to child welfare research. For many academics in the field of child welfare, there are varying philosophical schools in relation to research as well as differing views on methodologies and evidence in evaluation (Fives et al., 2017). In relation to the competing methodologies, there is a view that in completing evaluation in social science, RCTs need to be kept above all other forms of evidence and notably in preference to the valuing qualitative research (Pearce & Raman, 2014).

This emphasis on RCTs and outcomes is being challenged as there is a growing concern that social work research is different and more nuanced, with a stronger emphasis on service users' experiences. For example, placing children, parents or families in control and intervention groups where they receive or do not receive an intervention is complex and can raise ethical concerns (Dixon et al., 2014). Furthermore, ensuring accuracy in RCTs in terms of social intervention and

issues of fidelity to programmes or interventions is complex and difficult to achieve. These debates and controversies have led to a view favouring a more inclusive, nuanced and eclectic model of pluralist evaluation, which is in itself not inherently against RCTs, or quasi-experimental methodologies, but moves away from a hierarchical valuing system towards one that is more pragmatic ('best fit for purpose' methodologies) and values different forms of evidence, generated using a variety of methodologies.

The importance of this debate was illustrated by a debate that emerged about Family Group Conferences (FGCs) and RCTs between the State-funded What Works Centre and a group of academics. The What Works Centre proposed a study of FGCs using a RCT methodology. The academics questioned the ethics of this approach arguing that, 'some families will be denied the opportunity to exercise their rights and responsibilities in order to produce evidence for professionals and policy makers' and that, 'this is markedly different to experiencing uneven access to FGC services across the UK, instead this is curtailing the opportunity to exercise rights in the name of evidence' (Turner, 2019). The What Works Centre defended their position as follows: 'Conducting research badly, coming to the end and not learning the answers to questions, that would be unethical' (Turner, 2019). This debate is illustrative of our concerns: we would be on the side of the academic challengers here. There is clearly a role for research on FGCs—indeed we have undertaken such research—but this needs to take into account the process and participation aspects as well as a search for often illusive 'outcomes'.

## 6 | THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA—THE RHETORIC PROBLEM

Whatever the debates on the form of social research undertaken and the preferred type of methodology that is valued as best in terms of fit for purpose and function, there is one even more fundamental issue that has not been fully discussed or debated. This is the presence of published papers in child welfare and social work journals that are scripted on the basis on the evidence of pure rhetorical viewpoints, and not always founded on empirical research. What is most striking is the level of ping-pong articles that enable authors to rebuff previous loosely based theoretical commentary on their work by varying parties and all completed in the absence of any actual research (Garrett, 2003). Further in many cases, the articles produced while helpful in outlining what is key and necessary theory for social work, and they tend however, to continuously criticize child welfare policy practice or models (e.g., see Garrett, 2016). For those practitioners and policy makers who are fortunate to have time and capacity to engage in reading these articles, this can have a disempowering effect. In contrast, some academics have tried to challenge such criticisms of interventions that Parr (2009) has neatly associated with a 'doom-laden' analysis. A more blended approach to social work theory that underpins or implies a positive 'translational quality' that expands theoretical underpinnings into usable practice has been provided by others for example Jones's translation of social work theory

implementation in adoption and fostering (Jones, 2015; McGregor, 2019). Similarly, the inclusion of a strengths-based, solution focused pragmatic action based approach to social work and family support interventions based on evidence has grown (e.g., see Canavan et al., 2016; Williams & Churchill 2006). To be clear whereas we are stating that academic freedom is crucial and should not be impaired, and anything that both challenges policy and practice should be welcomed, without a solid foundation is still loose opinion even though it may well be published peer reviewed, highly ranked journals. Finally, theorists have argued that social work theory is essential and valuable and that its greatest value may lie in the core interplay with both policy and real world practice (Bilson et al. 2017; McGregor, 2019). So theory does not 'lead practice' but conversely, from practice experiences and real-life situations, inquiry-based learning can delve into social work theoretical frameworks that are useful and usable (Ferguson, 2016).

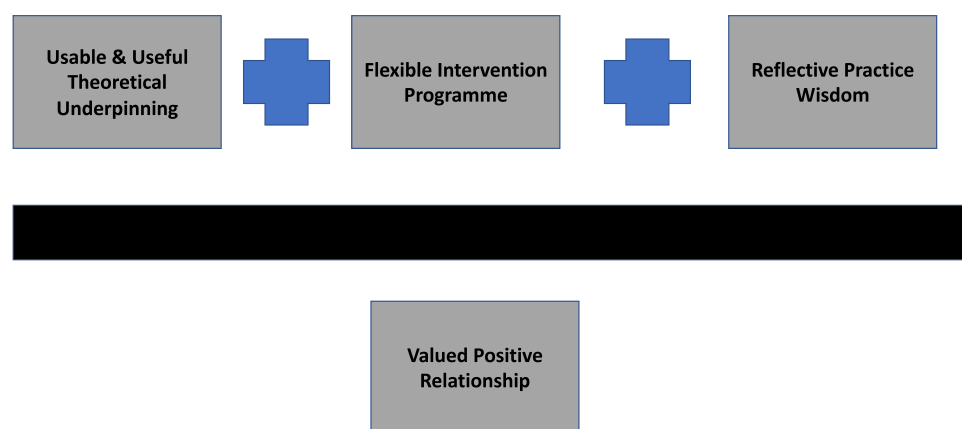
## 7 | FROM A BRICOLAGE TO AN ECLECTIC MODEL

With the intent of being more positive and ensuring that the authors here 'practice what they preach' (and not falling into a procrastinating rant or completing similar failures), we suggest a more positive model and an informal guide that might be useful to academics who work in this field. We suggest moving away from a bricolage approach, where all is muddled from overtheorizing at one end and disconnected from practice at the other extreme. We aim to counterbalancing negative critiques with an offer of an alternative approach based on a more eclectic model. This means, as far as is possible, for those who wish to purely criticize theories models practices and policies, there could be an ethical rider that involves their offering what can be done as well criticizing what has been done, given the policy and real life conditions people face, especially children and families and the frontline practitioners who work with and for them.

For example, and within another field of social work, namely, palliative care, Beresford et al. (2008) completed research that countermanded the perception of social work as being too bureaucratic in term of practices and emphasized the importance of relationships and humanity as core aspects of the social work profession. Second, theoretical argument needs to be based on actual research evidence rather than re-referencing and revisiting rhetorical arguments. Third, in terms of the better understanding of evidence, Kennan and Dolan (2017) balance the growing interest in rights-based working and the popular use of the concept of coproduction across communities, most notably with service users as part of the 'people proofing' process for articles and argument.

We argue here that in order to achieve good outcomes in child welfare, including better coping capacity, for those who access services, a range of conditions apply from the perspective of the case-worker. First, a sharing of theory and knowledge that is useful usable should be balanced with programmes and or interventions that work but that are also flexible in their application. In turn, the component of practitioner wisdom and judgement should be utilized through robust reflective practice. However, all three components, theory, programme and practice are only feasible on the basis of the existence of a valued and positive relationship between the worker and the child/youth, parent and family. This combination is presented graphically in Figure 1 below as a broad eclectic model equation.

Whereas as is often the case, on the upper side of the model, it may be that one element is stronger than the others the counterbalancing effect will win out, for example, it may be that the programme element is strongest but the theoretical underpinning or experience of the worker may be less apparent, conversely the programme may be lacking in some way but the workers' skill and wisdom win through and compensates and counterbalances the situation. However, the matter of strength of the relationship between the worker and the young person or parent is far less flexible and does not allow for such fluidity. No matter how strong the theory, or well proven the effect of the programme, or the experience and wisdom of



**FIGURE 1** Eclectic model equation for working with children and families



the worker if the relationship is failed or fraught, the desired outcomes simply will not be achieved.

## 8 | TOWARDS A USABLE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The extent to which theoretical frameworks in social work have proven to be useful to managers and practitioners in the field of social work remains somewhat of an unknown (Munro & Hardie, 2019). It could be argued that the extent to which well qualified and experienced social workers engage with theory in their practice is questionable.

More recently, McGregor (2019) completed a review of social work theory, with a view to the wider future and orientation of social work as a profession. Utilizing the nature and orientation of social work theories in paradigms spanning the late 20th until the early 21st century, she identifies a set of what she describes as 'essential requirements' for a theoretical framework for the profession moving forward, which includes better assimilation of local contexts for social work occurring in global conditions. She highlights the need to widen theory away from western dominated narratives and influence. However, more importantly, from the perspective of this paper, she emphasizes the role of critical reflexivity in activating theory, coupling this with the need for better testing of theory for practice purposes. This latter recommendation is particularly useful in that it enables theory to become live and usable for those operating on the frontline, giving some currency to the real world of practice delivery and management.

## 9 | FGCS—A HUMANIST, INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

So, apart from usable theory, in considering the usefulness of the counter-balancing model illustrated above, a number of other factors need consideration, not least in relation to flexible programmatic models for practice. At this point in time and in order to move on from a 'scandal-led' model at one end of the continuum and the strong evidence-led model at the other end of the continuum, we need a more reflective, humanistic relationship-based model that can be used in the frontline context. There are a number of accommodating positive practice models available including the Jean Baker Miller's relational-cultural model used in restorative practice (Miller, 1986). We argue here that these models, working together with a strong professional value base and reflective practice, present a positive way forward addressing many of the dilemmas outlined above.

Relationship-based practice can be central to all human relations professions—including counsellors, social workers, youth workers, family support workers and early years staff. These relationship-based models can respond reflectively to the inevitable demands of short-termism, which often lead to new forms of inspection, audit and monitoring. They can also learn from research and other forms of evidence—without applying data and findings in a 'robotic' manner. Human service practitioners can utilize the relationship with the

service user as a vehicle for support and change. These forms of practice are based on 'working with' (not 'doing to') people, by drawing on theories of strength-based and restorative practices. These overlapping approaches mean that agendas for change are devised alongside people receiving services and they can form agreed, joint programmes of work (Canavan et al., 2016).

Here, we provide the example of FGCs that exemplify all the approaches we favour here—they are based in relationships, are strengths-based and restorative. FGCs can provide the central plank of a family support platform. The Family Rights Group defines FGCs as follows: 'A decision-making, and planning process, whereby the wider family group makes plans and decisions for children and young people who have been identified either by the family or by service providers as being in need of a plan that will safeguard and promote their welfare' (Family Rights Group, 1993). Connolly further defines the FGC process as follows: 'The Family Group Conference is a participatory model of decision making with families in child protection. It is a legal process that brings together the family, including the extended family, and the professionals in a family-led decision-making forum' (Connolly, 2006: 90).

The FGC has four distinct stages. The first is the 'preparation stage' where an independent coordinator works with the extended family network to plan the FGC. The process includes exploring who should be invited to the FGC, the date, the time and the venue of the FGC and the nature of any refreshments to be provided. The coordinator spends time with family members, mediating and preparing them for the conference. The coordinator establishes that the focus of the FGC is on the best interest of the child or young person. The second stage is the 'information giving' stage that takes place at the beginning of the conference. Professionals share their concerns with the family and the family asks the professionals any questions that they may have. The third phase is 'private family time' where all the professionals, including the coordinator, leave the family on their own to produce a plan that attempts to address the professionals' concerns. The fourth phase involves the family sharing this plan with the professionals. Provided the plan does not leave the child 'at risk', the professionals are asked to agree to the plan. FGCs exemplify the approach we are suggesting here: that relationships matter, that there is no quick fix for family challenges and that process matters as well as outcomes. FGCs are worthwhile for these reasons, whether or not they can be proven to 'work'.

## 10 | THE ROLE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PRACTICE WISDOM

In essence social work, knowledge and wisdom arises from judgements on the part of the worker, rather than from the actual techniques they utilize. Using knowledge and learning needs to be constantly self-examined and recycled in ways that lead to fit for purpose practice: this will enable the social worker to discover and use knowledge effectively. Dolan et al. (2006) argues that reflective practice methods are a useful tool to enable self-wisdom creation. This

combines factors of 'Know of, Know how and Know to'. The factor 'Know of' relates to knowledge and learning which in part stems from theoretical framework for social work practice (Fook, 2016). Secondly, 'Know how' relates to practice techniques and skills in delivering an intervention (McGregor & Devaney, 2019). However, 'Know to' is acquired through reflective practice and combines knowledge and skills with judgement, which is the essence of reflective practice itself. One could argue this last aspect that can also be described as think in action on action relates most closely to the acquisition and use of practice wisdom.

There are in existence many models resources and toolkits for enabling reflective practice; however, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model has particular applicability in social work and through a cyclical model enables self-reflection on practice with a view to contributing to wisdom acquisition. It has also been pointed out by McGregor and Devaney (2019) that learning in practice involves learning from both failure and success and that a reasonable flexibility in practice errors is needed in order to learn, and this is regardless of how robust a programme or intervention is. Bluntly put, wisdom is accumulated from failure as well as from success.

In highlighting the importance of enabling practice wisdom to develop for new entrants into the social work profession, Samson (2015) highlights the centrality of relationships as key to social work and core to practice wisdom. She very neatly points to practice wisdom as the 'bridge between theory and practice' (p. 121). However, in considering social work, she raises the question about the historical purpose of social work as vocational and now professional with a focus on evidence and outcomes at the expense of the relational aspects of the work and what she describes as the 'artistry of social work' (p. 122). For Samson, this highlights the tension between outcomes and evidence and the freeing of emancipatory practices by social workers positively engaged in direct work. Similarly, Gray (2002) reflects on the social work as a humanistic endeavour. This view was echoed in at least one other study among social work veterans that found not alone are relationships the primary factor in good child protection and welfare practices but that over time, it has remained the essential ingredient (Devaney & Dolan, 2014).

## 11 | BAART'S PRESENCE APPROACH—VALUING RELATIONSHIP-BASED WORKING

Developed by Baart (2002), a presence approach offers a practical and accessible manner of activating practice wisdom through forms of reflective practice. Baart argues that any person receiving a service such as social work should experience a sense of 'presence' from the other person, including their focused attention that is fundamental to the success of the relationship. In the broadest sense, knowing that your social worker cares is committed, attentive and able to provide their genuine attention is not just demonstrable support but involves recognition, respect and reassurance (Houston & Dolan, 2008). Baart (2002) further suggests that within the model of presence, having someone you trust who is aware of your situation and familiar to

you is more valuable than a pure expert: an argument that has strong resonance for the operation of social work as a human profession.

However, it cannot be assumed that presence occurs on an ongoing basis on the part of the social worker in the casework relationship. For some social workers, the pressure on their time, burnout or work overload can minimize the capacity to remain both present and engaged. Just as for parents and carers, it may not be a singular stress that causes them distress but the combination of stressors coming together, similarly for social workers and particularly those doing child protection work, the personal and professional impact can sometimes be too much to bear (Ferguson, 2016). The importance of having 'present social workers' can be further undermined if the agency for whom they work are dominated by targets, timelines, inspections and pedantic forms of transparency (e.g., overly detailed correctness in form filling) to the extent that basic social work practice can be undermined. The importance of presence working by social workers and its effectiveness was a most resounding finding of research by Beresford et al. (2008). In their large-scale study of the perception of social workers, delivering palliative care services those that were engaged, empathetic, caring and deemed as a friend were seen as most helpful by service users.

Kuis et al. (2015) developed eight key principles for presence, which we suggest have resonance for social work practice. Although developed for nursing, they can act as a helpful self-evaluation tool for practitioners to monitor the extent of their connectivity with those they work with and for. Here, we have compressed and adapted these principles for the purpose of social worker intervention and working with others.

## 12 | PRINCIPLES FOR PRESENCE IN SOCIAL WORK

1. **To be free for**—whatever the service user needs and brings up
2. **Open for**—genuinely entering into the presence and the current situation for the person they are working with
3. **Attentive relation**—focusing on the whole situation rather than anyone aspect and continuously checking out the situation.
4. **Connecting to what exists**—fitting in with the daily world of the other
5. **Changing perspective**—being able to perceive the world from the perspective of the other person in a non-judgemental way.
6. **Being available**—being of service to the person offering not just expertise and facilities but working through possible solutions
7. **Patience and time**—remaining unhurried and taking time enables better decision making for the person
8. **Loyal dedication**—remaining loyal and offering unconditional support to the person

## 13 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have sought to combine the concept of usable theory with flexible practices and professional wisdom, underpinned by



humanistic, relationship-based social work through direct work with young people and families. We see 'direct relationship working' as key, and although this is not new, it is a timely reminder. Whittaker and Garbarino (1983, p. xi), over 30 years ago stressed the key point that relationships are the 'bread and butter' of support. Similarly, 20 years ago, Jack (1997) reinforced this approach to social work practice as moving away from working with families as 'social casualties' (p. 112) towards inclusive community orientated direct intervention. However, with the ever-increasing demands both personal and professional on child protection and child welfare workers often culminating in a blame game for instances when things are perceived to have gone wrong it is also incumbent on academics in social work do undertake relevant and practical work. Importantly, they should not overtheorize or be too opinionated by acting as conductors of rhetoric or as pure critics of policy and practice. Such academic work is unhelpful to those in the field who require robust, well-informed advice on what might actually work or be helpful. If nothing else the argument and model proposed here is a genuine effort to create a new real world discourse, which offers both respect and recognition for a complex professional role.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data generated.

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