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Staying in touch in the digital era: New social work practice

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Abstract

The findings of a small-scale empirical study are drawn upon to explore the concept of social presence and the way in which it can contribute to meeting service users' expectations of relationship-based social work. Findings from the study highlight the role of mobile communication technologies in establishing social presence with service users and an argument is made for the proactive use of mobile devices as a component of direct practice. However, such emerging digital social work practices will require practitioners, and social work organisations, to respond positively to new ethical and organisational challenges.

Keywords: relationship-based social work; social presence; social media; children; families

Human relationships in the twenty-first century are increasingly mediated by internet-enabled communication devices, and the smartphone has emerged as a key technology for personal and professional networking. A report by Ofcom, the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industry, highlighted that, in 2015, smartphones were the most widely owned internet-enabled devices (Ofcom, 2015). In the first quarter of 2015 smartphones were present in two-thirds of UK households (66%), on a par with laptops at 65%. The Ofcom (2015) report highlighted that smartphones are used primarily for communication activities including: text messaging, emailing, social networking, instant messaging, and voice or video calls. Almost three times as many young people aged 16-24 owned a smartphone when compared to the over-55 age group. The Ofcom (2015) report indicates clearly that mobile communication technologies have penetrated the routine, everyday life of most individuals and their families. Nor is the ubiquity of mobile communication technologies confined to households, they are also prevalent in the provision of a variety of services including social work and social care services.

This article is based on a subset of findings from an empirical study designed to explore the continuing professional development (CPD) requirements of child and family social work practitioners. Listening to service users' views of the knowledge and skills practitioners should possess is an important part of understanding what ought to be included in social worker CPD requirements. A significant finding from this study was the consensus that service users sought relationship-based social work (Beresford, et al., 2008) and that this required social workers to possess effective communication skills. One incidental finding of the study was that service users were of the view that social workers should use a variety of communication methods, including mobile devices and social media, to foster effective

working relationships. This included, for example, the expectation that social workers should use text messaging and email to communicate directly with them. However, service users perceptions were that these expectations were not reciprocated by social workers, and the resulting mismatch caused high levels of frustration, disappointment and feelings that social workers did not care for their wellbeing.

This incidental finding is explored in greater detail below and the concept of *social presence* (LaMendola, 2010) is introduced to interpret the experience of services users and consider the potential role of mobile communication technologies in building professional working relationships. An argument will be made that social workers might better meet the needs of service users by using mobile technologies to establish social presence, but only if there are changes to the way in which social care organisations and practitioners work. Specifically, attention will be given to the ethical and organisational challenges that need to be overcome in order to implement new ways of working in the digital era.

A number of recent British studies and media reports provide insight into the ways in which communication technologies are being used in social work and social care. One study, examining digital capabilities in the adult social care workforce, highlighted the pervasive use of digital technologies across the sector (Dunn & Braddell, 2014). The study showed that technologies are having an impact on interactions between care staff and the people they support, and included examples of the use of digital technology by care staff to plan leisure activities, keep in touch with family and friends, and communicate with other professionals (e.g. general practitioners). The study also revealed that the majority of respondents made use of their personal smartphones to support their work with service users (Dunn & Braddell, 2014). Importantly, the significant determinants of whether or not social care organisations embraced digital technologies appeared to be influenced by management priorities and the overall attitude towards change held by the organisation and its staff.

Thus far, a similar sector-wide study has not taken place in the UK for child and family social work. Although, there have been a number of studies focussing on the education of social work students (Cooner, 2014; and Jones, 2010) and the e-professionalism of teachers and social workers (Kirwin & McGuckin, 2014). In particular, Kirwin and McGuckin (2014) questioned the extent to which recent policy developments are helpful to newly qualified social work practitioners in the UK grappling with the professional implications of social media. Their conclusion was that the ambiguity of current guidance in relation to social media, and the minimal attention given to it by education and training providers, is likely to leave new graduates ill-equipped and incapable of dealing with the complexities of electronic communication. Other UK examples of technology use in the child and family social work field include Nottinghamshire County Council who have piloted the use of iPads for social work practitioners, enabling them to spend more time with service users (Hardy, 2014). In addition, Dodsworth et al. (2013) illustrate how a number of local authorities made use of a purpose-built internet service aimed at improving communication flow between foster carers and social work practitioners. The findings from their study identified that, although computerised forms of communication are accepted by foster carers, the majority of foster carers (and practitioners) preferred to use traditional modes of communication such as the telephone (Dodsworth et al., 2013). Importantly, the study highlighted that the internet provided an additional dimension to the communication and sharing of information, but it did not replace existing methods.

Method

As stated previously, the aim of the small-scale empirical study on which this article is based was to devise a CPD framework for a local authority that would map career pathways with associated training and development opportunities for social work

practitioners (and the non-registered staff that work alongside them). The study used a mixed methods approach in order to gather and analyse a range of perspectives, and methods included: an online survey for social work practitioners and non-registered staff that work alongside them; a survey for commissioners; and separate focus groups for adult service users, young people who had been or were in receipt of children's social care services, and senior managers. For the purposes of this article only the findings from the service user focus groups are used.

The study received ethical approval from the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. As part of this process informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and, in the case of the young people who participated, two levels of consent were employed. The first level of consent was sought from parents or carers, and then consent was sought from each young person. This was done as part of appreciating the need for negotiated informed consent, as opposed to relying solely on proxy consent from their adult gatekeepers (Tisdall, Davies & Gallacher, 2009).

Separate service user and carer focus groups were conducted with young people and adults who were currently, or had been, in receipt of social care services from the local authority. This was done in order to provide a perspective on workforce development informed by personal experiences of service delivery. The use of the focus group method with service users provided the opportunity to gain insights into the shared experiences and perspectives of this key stakeholder group, particularly in relation to the skills and attributes they considered to be required of qualified social workers and non-registered social care staff (Macnaghten & Myers, 2013). Respondent recruitment was based on a stratified purposive sampling technique. Each focus group was conducted using a series of exercises based on the

Department of Education's (2014) *Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Social Work*. The knowledge and skill statement provides the UK government's official benchmark for the child and family social work workforce and it is structured into the following ten discrete components: 1) Relationships and effective direct work; 2) Communication; 3) Child development; 4) Adult mental ill health, substance misuse, domestic abuse, physical ill health and disability; 5) Abuse and neglect of children; 6) Child and family assessment; 7) Analysis, decision-making, planning and review; 8) The law and the family and youth justice systems; 9) The role of supervision; 10) Organisational context.

The young persons' focus groups (N=8: one male and seven females aged between 16 and 19 years of age) were asked to rank order and discuss the first seven components, and a similar exercise was undertaken with the adult focus group (N=5: one male and four females aged between ?). The adult group ranked and discussed all 10 elements of the statement of knowledge and skills as it was assumed they would have a better understanding of the wider workforce skills and organisational issues that influence child and family social work practice. All respondents in the focus groups were also asked to give examples of when the knowledge and skills components were demonstrated by qualified social work practitioners and when they were not. Following this, a further exercise was undertaken with respondents who were asked what they felt was important for social work practitioners to learn about but did not appear in the statement of knowledge and skills. A final exercise was undertaken with both focus groups that consisted of asking questions in relation to non-registered social care staff and the way in which their practice differed from registered social work practitioners, and what knowledge and skills this sector of the children's integrated workforce needed in order to carry out their role.

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed and the data was thematically analysed with units of text dealing with the same issues placed together into analytic groupings and given provisional thematic titles (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These provisional thematic titles were shared as part of ensuring both the coherence and replicability of the provisional thematic titles that had been identified (Frith & Gleeson, 2014).

Findings

In summary, across both focus groups, there was strong support for the theme of relationship-based social work (Beresford et al., 2008). Service users sought social workers who could foster trust, communicate effectively, offer better assessments, pace their interventions well, and thus achieve better outcomes. Such findings chime with the findings of Beresford (2007) in relation to the changing roles and tasks of social work practitioners from a service user's perspective. In particular, all of the members of the adult focus group were of the view that, without a positive relationship with a social work practitioner, it was not possible to engage in meaningful and honest communication. What was also evident from the initial findings of the ranking exercise was that *communication* was identified as being highly important for both focus groups. Respondents from both the adult and young people's service user focus groups highlighted that, where there is a lack of longevity in the relationship with a qualified social work practitioner this led to low levels of trust, an inability or unwillingness to communicate, and possibly poor mental health outcomes.

See I've had my kids on a plan, within a year they've had 12 different social workers. And my daughter don't like none of them now because she thinks she can't, she tries to talk to one and then six months later he's moved so she's got another one. So she doesn't feel safe with them. My daughter she's got to the stage of self-harming herself now because of different people coming in and out of her life. (Parent/Carer E)

It's like as well when they go and leave or anything, or whether they go on holiday or something, they don't inform you. So if you're trying to ring them in the office.

(Young Person A)

The majority of respondents in the young people's focus group valued a meaningful and ongoing relationship with their social work practitioner.

My social worker will not contact me for months on end. I won't get a text, I won't get a phone call, like she won't see me. Like I've probably seen, I've had this social worker since October, I've probably seen her about three, four times. (Young Person B)

It was also noted that where there was a lack of contact with social work practitioners this led to feelings of vulnerability, and an unwillingness to share difficulties being experienced,

“Like because, if that child feels like they have some, they don't have anybody there that can then lead to other problems”. (Include a participant label as above)

All focus groups respondents were able to describe the characteristics of good communication they had seen exhibited by social work practitioners and non-registered social care staff. Respondents identified that trust, honesty, as well as staying in touch were important components of good communication, as was partnership working with families. Other components illustrating good communication concerned the way in which practitioners, and particularly non-registered social care staff, communicated with young

people: for example, having rapport with young children, speaking in child-friendly language, and enabling young people to speak by being available.

Basically. She can do communication, regular contact pretty much all the time if we needed her we could ring her. (Young Person A)

My social worker's really good because if I can't get her on the phone I'll email her and she'll email me back and that's great. In this day and world if you can't get them on the telephone. And also if you have an email, right, you've got a paper trail anyway, and yeah, and then you can go back. (Parent/Carer A)

Service user's perceptions of qualified social work practitioners were also impacted by their failure to use a variety of modern communication methods that included texting, messaging, and social media. Many of the service users complained about having to go through the Council switchboard in order to gain access and communicate with their allocated social work practitioner. These experiences, it would seem, had an impact on relationships causing frustration and a heightened sense of unavailability.

But here, they've all moved into the civic centre, the telephone switchboard, absolute nightmare. (Parent/Carer C)

Yeah. I have now recently just got after three years their social worker's mobile number, after three years of keep asking them. And it's took three years to get a mobile number so I can get in touch. (Parent/Carer E)

A theme that was evident across the service users focus groups, as well as the senior management focus group, was organisational pressure in the form of high staff turnover, stress, poor communication, and an inability to work at the service user's pace. Beresford (2007) comments that service user's experience and perceptions of statutory social work has been influenced by the effect of local government bureaucratic culture. Ultimately, this has had a damaging impact on service users' experiences of social work services, as Beresford (2007) states, "It has undermined continuity, demotivated staff, resulted in constant changes in personnel and organisational arrangements, requiring frequent relearning and the remaking of relationships". (p.22)

Another significant finding, across both focus groups, was the difference in the way in which qualified practitioners and non-registered social care staff were perceived. It may be the case that the power-imbalance, and the time available to build and carry out activities to consolidate relationships, impacted on the way in which social care services were perceived. This might also explain the common finding in relation to the pace of intervention, which was mentioned by all focus groups. Many service users considered that the pace of social workers' interventions was too fast, and failed to take account of the emotional cues of service users, particularly in relation to a crisis situation or where young services users struggled to cope with the responsibilities of adulthood. Whereas, the opposite was true for non-registered social care staff who were universally lauded by all respondents as being available, reliable, skilled and trustworthy.

Me personally, I've had R my support worker, what, like well how many months.
I've probably seen her more than I've seen my social worker since I've had her.
(Young Person B)

Yeah, like if we're on Facebook and she sees a status update with one of us that have been hurt or whatever, she would kind of ring us and be like what's going on type thing. Do you know what I mean? (Young Person C)

All of the respondents from both service user focus groups had expectations about texting and emailing. In particular, for younger service users, there was a view that messaging and the checking of status via social networking sites should be the norm for modern social work practice. The perceived difference in the availability and presence of social work practitioners, when compared to support workers, might also be a reflection of the way in which support workers made use of mobile communication technologies to maintain contact and the social presence that was generated as a result. One finding of note, raised by the young people's focus group, was the need for knowledge and understanding in relation to communicating in the digital era. The young people pointed out that, unless practitioners had a reasonable understanding of social networking, it would be difficult to receive the correct level of support at the right time.

In a way they need to know - I don't want to say this harshly but they need to keep up with the latest trends, like the latest apps and like what goes on, just so they have a better understanding. So like if you're talking about a new app and they're just a bit like behind and they're, they're not understanding how maybe important it is, how much it's affecting them, so like it does help to have an understanding of social media and what goes on. (Young Person F).

In other words these young services users considered knowledge and skills in social media use to be a vital part of the communication toolkit required of modern social work practitioners. They felt social workers needed to recognise the everyday experience of young people, where there was a seamless flow between the offline and online worlds.

In summary, the overarching theme from the adult and young people's service user focus groups, was the notion of relationship-based social work (Beresford et al., 2007) which was strongly allied to good communication including the use of mobile devices that enable telephone, email, text and personal messaging via social networking sites. It could be argued that service users growing tendency to rely on these devices, as part of their everyday communication practice, is creating new expectations regarding not only how they expect to communicate with practitioners, but how these same practitioners should communicate with them.

Discussion

Beresford, Croft, and Adshead (2008) have questioned the extent to which service users' desire for relationship-based social work could be delivered in a social work environment that was characterised as short on time and orientated towards form filling. Several years later it seems that little has changed, and yet services users' aspirations for relationship-based practice is still present (see Doel, 2010; Ruch, 2005; and Jordan, 2016). Relationship-based practice has a particular value for work with children and young people. A recent report by The Care Inquiry (2013) found that, for children and young people in care, relationship was vital:

The weight of evidence, from all quarters, convinces us that the *relationships* with people who care for and about children are the golden thread in children's lives, and that the quality of a child's relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do. (Care Inquiry, 2013, p. 2).

For these young people the lack of a meaningful relationship was equated with a lack of genuine care on the part of their allocated practitioner, and a possible increase in risk due to a lack of guidance. This perspective is supported by Gaskill's (2010) study which aimed to explore young care leavers' experiences of care, as well as the extent to which feelings of care shaped self-esteem and a sense of self. The conclusion of this study was that trust and stability in the provision of care services shape positive outcomes for care leavers (Gaskill's, 2010).

The findings of the present study support an argument that one of the necessary conditions for the development of meaningful relationships between social workers and service users is the establishment of a sense of social presence, and that mobile communications technologies may play a significant role in creating and maintaining social presence. LaMendola (2010) explored the notion of social presence in the context of computer mediated communications, focussing specifically on the way in which technology enabled individuals to develop an awareness of the other, and feel connected or involved with the other. The earlier work of Rettie (2005, 2007, 2008 and 2009) on mobile phones and texting provides a useful reference point and offers three definitions of presence. The first definition is concerned with the *projected presence* of a person, much like that of a Facebook profile. The second focuses on the *sense of the other*, akin to the experience of a telephone conversation where there is social interaction, the third definition is *co-presence*, which

means that a psychological connection is established and an individual feels that s/he has access to another person's intent and affect.

Whilst Rettie's (2008 , 2009) work occurred at a time when most mobile phones did not have internet access what was apparent from her work on mobile telephony and text messaging were the communication repertoires, co-ordinating calls and texts, that respondents developed with their partners, friends and family leading to a form of co-presence akin to face-to-face interaction. Text messages allowed respondents the opportunity to let others know they were thinking of them without the level of intrusion associated with a mobile telephone call. Rettie also identified that mobile phones increased the availability of social support resulting in increased communication time that ultimately prompted face-to-face communication. When Rettie's earlier (2007, 2008, 2009) findings are considered alongside the results of the present study, the comments made by service users in relation to practitioners using more than one method of communication, and what they consider constitutes good and bad communication, takes on an entirely different perspective. Many of the respondents in this study had a limited sense of presence in relation to their allocated social work practitioner and felt this individual was not involved, connected or known to them. However, this perception did not apply to non-registered social care staff, who appeared to make greater use of a range of communication methods and consequently conveyed a stronger sense of their presence, engagement and involvement with services users.

Rettie's (2007, 2008 and 2009) work is helpful in enabling us to understand that *presence* is experienced at different levels using different modes of communication. This might explain why respondents from the focus groups became frustrated when their ability to

connect and have a *sense of presence* was blocked by bureaucratic systems and traditional modes of communication. The application of Rettie's research (2007, 2008 and 2009) also brings into sharp focus what is meant by direct work as carried out by social work practitioners. The findings from this study highlight that service users expressed the need for greater social presence from their individual social work practitioner, a sense of social presence that could be supported by the use of a variety of communication methods and platforms including texting, messaging, status updates and posts. Such ways of working call into question what we might currently understand as direct work with service users and how social care organisations accommodate to it.

That said, such new ways of working are not without their ethical and operational challenges. For example, Reamer (2013) identifies the risk from blurred boundaries and dual relationships associated with online self-disclosure between practitioners and service users, and the risks from accepting gifts and invitations. In addition, communication via social media may compromise service user confidentiality and risk breaching private information in relation to the practitioner's own family and friends. Another difficulty is presented by the extent to which social networking sites are secure. The use of social media sites to share confidential information that not only concerns the service user, but also others, calls into question the level of confidence practitioners can have in the security settings available to service users and their ability to apply it. There are also potential problems associated with service users, or practitioners, suddenly ending the relationship. Reamer (2013) is of the view that when such a situation occurs it could be perceived as abandonment, meaning the relationship between the service user and practitioner is terminated and continuity in terms of service provision is affected. Tregeagle and Darcy (2008) spotlight problems associated with image management and dishonesty by service users, and that the lack of physical contact may

endanger the wellbeing of children who are identified as being at risk of significant harm. They also highlight the potential for over reliance on virtual communication by practitioners, particularly in circumstances where a family or birth parent may have a reputation of being manipulative, argumentative and or violent.

As stated previously, there are also operational issues that need to be considered if a range of mobile communication technologies are adopted as a means of promoting social presence. Child and family social work in Britain is often said to be unpredictable and in crisis (Ruch 2005; Asquith et al., 2005; Munro, 2011; Social Work Reform Board, 2012). Other descriptions of this area of social work includes it being anxiety provoking with outcomes that are, at times, ineffectual (Ruch, 2005; Waterhouse and McGhee, 2009). Sadly, the response to such unpredictability and anxiety has been an increase in proceduralization and bureaucracy (Ruch, 2005; Waterhouse & McGhee, 2009), as well as competency and knowledge tests (see Trowler, 2015), all of which are unlikely to be conducive to relationship-based social work, and may ultimately act as barriers to the use of alternative methods of communication. Evidence of this seems apparent from the study undertaken by Dodsworth et al., (2013) which noted that the purposely-designed internet service for foster carers and social workers was rarely used, with the preferred communication methods being telephone, mobile and face-to-face. In terms of texting this was one of the least used communication methods with only 22-38% of respondents making use of it.

Given the possible organisational and ethical challenges that might come with trying to implement these new ways of achieving social presence, how might social care organisations facilitate practitioners to engage in the use of a variety of communication platforms and methods? One suggestion is that the wider organisation provides the necessary

procedural space and working practices to allow practitioners to make use of communication methods like texting to remind parents, carers and young people about care meetings and reviews. Going one step further, the wider organisation might allow practitioners to divest themselves, to some extent (whilst still remaining within statutory guidelines), of the safe and known territory of the home visit towards other types of meetings where the service user may not be physically in the same room, but present via another communication medium altogether, for example through the use of video or Skype calls. Moreover, consideration could also be given to the provision of services going beyond the confines of the 9am-5pm working week if the type of relationship-based social work that service users want is to be realised.

For individual practitioners, how might they change their practice to accommodate the expressed need of service users for a greater sense of presence? If practitioners are to embrace the communication needs of service users it is likely to mean releasing the control and power they currently hold over communication encounters with their service users. As has been argued by Tregeagle and Darcey (2008), this would involve service users being able to direct the timetable and flow of interactions in a way that would better suit their needs and desire for greater social presence. For example, a young person in care may be more willing to engage with reviews and care planning proceedings if his/her views were sought over a longer period of time using the medium of Facebook messenger, as opposed to a one-off meeting taking place in the environment of a foster home or the practitioner's office (Create Foundation, 2004). Moreover, it could be argued that this approach might allow for the ongoing building of a relationship over time, and, if done successfully, may have the effect of increasing the sense of presence the young person has of his/her allocated social work practitioner.

Conclusion

This paper highlights findings that service users' expect professional social workers to possess strong communication and relationship-building skills, including skills in utilising digital communication technologies. However, this was an incidental finding in a study designed primarily to consider the CPD needs of social workers. In addition, the study sample size is small (with a total of 13 participants in the two service user focus groups) making generalisation difficult. Nonetheless, when viewed in the context of earlier work on the role of communication media in establishing a sense of social presence, it is highly suggestive of a need for social workers to develop new digital communication skills, and for an appraisal of possible institutional barriers to the development and use of these skills. To elucidate this issue in greater detail, further research, with a larger sample size, is required, and should focus explicitly on the communication practices and expectations of service users, social workers and their managers.

The use of mobile communications technology to mediate human interaction seems likely to increase, and with it, the expectation of service users for a relationship-based social work practice that is mediated, in part, by everyday digital communication technologies. In this context, there is a need for social work practitioners “to establish [a] firm footing in all spaces where humans create associations, whether online or offline” (LaMendola, 2010, p.117). As LaMendola (2010) concludes:

an expanded notion of presence for the profession means blending face-to-face encounters with those that are not. It means accepting the premise that social presence

is embodied but not contained by physicality. It is an appreciation that in all its forms, social presence is the carrier of relationships. (p. 117)

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