



Open Research Online

Citation

Vicary, Sarah (2024). Tick box or relationship-based? How will history judge our work with older people? Professional Social Work, May-Jun 24

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/99633/>

License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

Tick box or relationship-based? How will history judge our work with older people?

Dr Sarah Vicary, professor of social work and mental health with the Open University, reflects on a recent seminar in the latest SWHN thought piece

Social work with older people is a forgotten field of practice, or at least generally hidden. Few social work students actively choose it and there are limited accounts of past practice to build on. In light of the demographic changes in the population, this is surely a worry.

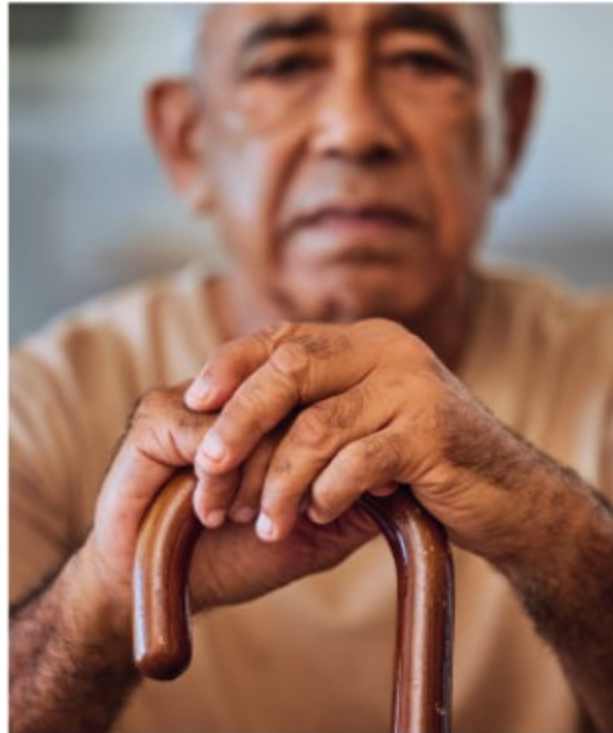
Delving into the history of this area, a recent Social Work History Network (SWHN) seminar provided much to reflect upon. It was maintained that while policy shapes practice, things do not happen quickly, especially in relation to social work with older people. Post-Seeborn policy became dominated by bureaucracy, culminating in today's widespread targeting of resources and an environment in which the private sector overshadows care for older people. In this context, has our work become a tick box exercise?

Social workers engaged in many activities under the National Assistance Act 1948 and mental health laws, but little mention is made of dementia. Barbara Robb, in her 1967 book *Sans Everything*, highlighted the often poor treatment of older people in hospitals. Works such as this can be an untapped mine for social work historians. But I find myself wondering what progress in valuing older people with dementia has been made?

The importance of social work's relationship-based role was highlighted during the seminar. We are far more than friendly visitors, but undertake work based on complex interactions between money, health, and housing, all at the interface of what can be intricate familial relationships and social experiences. Research from the late 1980s showed that high quality case management services, when well targeted, improved quality of life, reduced stress and were cost-effective. Social work with older people is a skilled task, but it has been in the 'guise' of care management. Have these so-called softer skills become eroded and marginalised and is there no longer a focus on relationships as important to the delivery of social work?

The evolution of the abuse of older people was charted by SWHN member Bridget Penhale, who was central in raising its awareness, and of the need to promote adult safeguarding (as we now call it) in social work practice, teaching and research. England's Care Act 2014 acknowledges the need for work in this area but responses can be curtailed by limited resources.

And so, we come full circle to the resource debate. Is



social work dislocated from the life course, from the social perspective and understanding it brings?

There is no doubt that the needs of many older people are complex, and that time is required to explore the intersection of health, social and relational issues. Needs are often amplified by older people having limited access to resources and publicly funded support. Reliance on the family is a significant feature of the current welfare paradigm, despite their relatively invisible public profile.

What is important is the *process* of social work and the *value* of talking to, listening and understanding an older person and their carer's experiences. Will historians looking back on today see social work with older people in England as having made an irreversible shift to a tick box exercise rather than a human relationship-based activity? Or will they be able to find evidence that the profession sees human relationships as paramount?

Adapted from 'Social work with older people – a hidden history' a seminar held in November 2023

Slides from the seminar are available on the SWHN website

Speakers at the seminar were Bob Hudson, Jill Manthorpe, Allison Milne and Bridget Penhale