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Relational Social Work: Principles and Practices

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Relational social work engages with existing networks to enhance their resilience and capacity to resolve difficulties. It does this by addressing the identified problem, and by engaging, mobilising and developing both supportive and problem-solving networks. These networks can include family members, friends, teachers and any other significant actors who have a contribution to make. The participative approach offers a way of translating policies that aspire to social inclusion into practice.

Introduction

In this article, I explore a theoretical framework to understand and utilise the dynamic relationship between those helping and those needing help. I use concepts that are current UK social work preoccupations – power and empowerment; partnership and participation (Morris, 2004). However, this discussion locates these concepts within social networks rather than individual helping relationships – a shift that social work has at times struggled to achieve (Burford *et al*., 2003).

I begin by examining the origins and traditions of social work activity and theoretical frameworks. Relational social work is set against this background analysis of theory and practice. The principles and practices of relational social work are then described within the context of child protection, using brief case examples.

Emerging social work practice such as Family Group Conferences, Family Meetings and some models of restorative justice aim to work with and harness the strengths and opportunities for change presented by social networks. Relational social work begins to suggest a theoretical framework for these practice developments.

A theoretical basis for 'social helping'

The relational perspective is consistent with the classic values of social work when applied to the field of social care and community development. It becomes more controversial, stimulating and challenging when it is applied in practices concerned with social control. The concepts of networking, on which relational practice is based, imply a reflexive and fully 'social' methodology that translates into practice the abstract ideas of phenomenology and social constructionism. Here I present a logical scheme that visualises the helping process from such a relational perspective.

Relational social work is primarily a theory. Applied through networking, it is also a methodology and a style of work in professional practice. Fundamentally, it is a way of conceiving social helping, regardless of how it is practised in a particular setting. Usually, we dislike theories and abstractions. We ask ourselves what their purpose is, whether they are a waste of time. When we are certain about what our bases and directions

are, we may be able to privilege techniques and applications. We can be concrete and neglect pure thought. But the time is not right for this. The very basis of social work has been questioned, and even its moral legitimacy is contested. As Bauman (2000) reminds us in his essay 'Am I my brother's keeper?', the legitimacy of social work is questioned by those who do not believe that people should be helped, or that they *can* be helped by welfare institutions and professional practitioners. At best, these critics concede that people should be helped within the strict parameters of efficiency, controlled by managers external to the profession, which means that the profession is dead (Payne, 2005). We need a better understanding of what the 'social' is in social work (Seeds, 1990) and how the social 'works' to generate well-being. What social helping is and what it produces is still a scientific mystery. We must gain better understanding of how welfare organisations – in particular in fieldwork settings – can enter more closely into relationships with society, not so that they can care for it or help it, but rather so that they can produce the necessary 'solutions' in a close partnership (in relation). These are the principles of the so-called 'welfare society' (Rodger, 2000), principles which need to be better understood and translated into practice.

Social work should question its historical ties with clinical psychology and with the medical model. Clinical thought has undoubtedly enriched social work in conceptual and operational terms. However, this powerful body of thought is unable to grasp the essence of what social helping is. The relational model of social work shifts the axis from psychology to micro-sociology, using as its cornerstone the concept of intentional free action, what Giddens (1991) and Archer (2000, 2003) call 'agency'.

The relational approach (Folgheraiter, 2004) is a model that provides a comprehensive explanation of how solutions to social problems arise from within them. This does not mean denying that social problems often have external causes, such as the structural characteristics of society that create inequalities, exclusion, poverty or conflicts; nor does it mean denying that social problems often have internal causes, in the personalities, characters or minds of the people involved. Social workers can be active in reparative/remedial work, but they must do so looking at the capacity for action of the people involved. Social workers can and must be active in the construction of 'emancipatory politics' alongside policy makers. But social work concerns itself with structural politics within the more general framework of 'life politics'.

By the term 'social problems' I mean the difficulties of human living as the people concerned represent these to themselves. From a social work perspective, a social problem is merely a difficulty in living, not the cause of that difficulty. Drawing on Giddens' logic of 'life politics', we may say that the 'object' of social work intervention, is the 're-organisation of life courses' – what Ferguson (2001) calls 'life planning'. Social work must enter reflexively into the everyday life of a subject (a person, family or a local community) in order to support or reinforce life change through the agency of that subject itself, however weak its capacity to act at the start. In this way, social action excavates and deconstructs from bottom up the perverse patterns (individual, structural or collective) that have created the problems. This deconstruction of the perceived problem starts with the construction of alternative broad goals in the minds of the persons concerned, from which ensues conscious changing agency.

The basic idea of relational social work is simple: a close partnership and reciprocity between expert systems and the society. This idea is consistent with social work principles, primarily self-determination, partnership and subsidiarity. However, the more this idea

sounds familiar, the less it is applied in practice, especially in statutory services. It exposes the most sensitive nerve of modern professionalism: power. Empowerment is often emphasised in words, but in practice it may be uncomfortable. Relational social work is not a prescriptive or normative theory. It does not tell social workers to do things completely differently from what they have done hitherto. It is a theory that starts from observation of what works. It is a 'hermeneutic' theory derived from observation and intelligent decoding of what happens when a social intervention works in practice. It explains a paradox of social work practice that positivist theories are unable to clarify. This is that, at the beginnings of the profession, when nothing was known about helping techniques or theories, there were outstanding social workers who helped very well. What was the source of the efficacy of these practitioners bereft of theory? They leveraged the intelligence and the good sense of the social. Relational theory gives us a framework with which to read good practices *a posteriori* and to learn methodologically from them (Ferguson, 2003).

According to relational theory, a social worker is effective when s/he realises that the solution to a problem emerges from the social relations involved. It is therefore a theory of solutions, not of problems and their causes (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). It defines problems in reverse as unfound solutions. By 'solutions' I mean 'possible improvements' in difficult situations. These improvements are not produced directly by specific objective inputs (administrative techniques, procedures or standard provisions), rather, they are constructed by the fortunate encounter of free shared agencies directed to that improvement. Relational social work does not conceive action by solitary individuals who pursue their specific goals; it always conceives the free encounter of a multiplicity of actions, which find shared goals and establish synergies. These actions are often cognitive and verbal, and are therefore pure reflexivity constructed dialogically, in the sense of the narrative approach (Milner and O'Byrne, 2002; Parton, 2003). Exchange creates 'relational goods': beneficial phenomena, only produced through the virtuous encounter of two or more acting subjects (Donati, 2000).

Relational social work in practice

Relational social work is not a theory about the technical procedures of social work. Even less so is networking a technique in itself. It is not an 'expert' and authoritarian manipulation of social relations, so that they assume the form that the experts want. Family therapy, child protection conferences, case management, multi-professional teams or family conferences are not relational merely because they concern themselves with arrangements of relations. An interactional pattern is truly 'relational' only if the component actions are given sufficient freedom. A social worker must see the overall dynamics within which solutions arise. As Giddens (1990) reminds us, post-modern professionals must know how to look outside their professionalism and enrich themselves with external autonomous contributions. And they must not allow themselves to be deceived by appearances. Even when there is convincing evidence that a specific professional intervention or a standard provision has improved a situation, the social worker knows that s/he has been fortunate, and that other unforeseen, and perhaps unforeseeable, external effects have contributed to that outcome. When a social work formal technique is successful, it is because it provokes a beneficial reflexive 'shock' in

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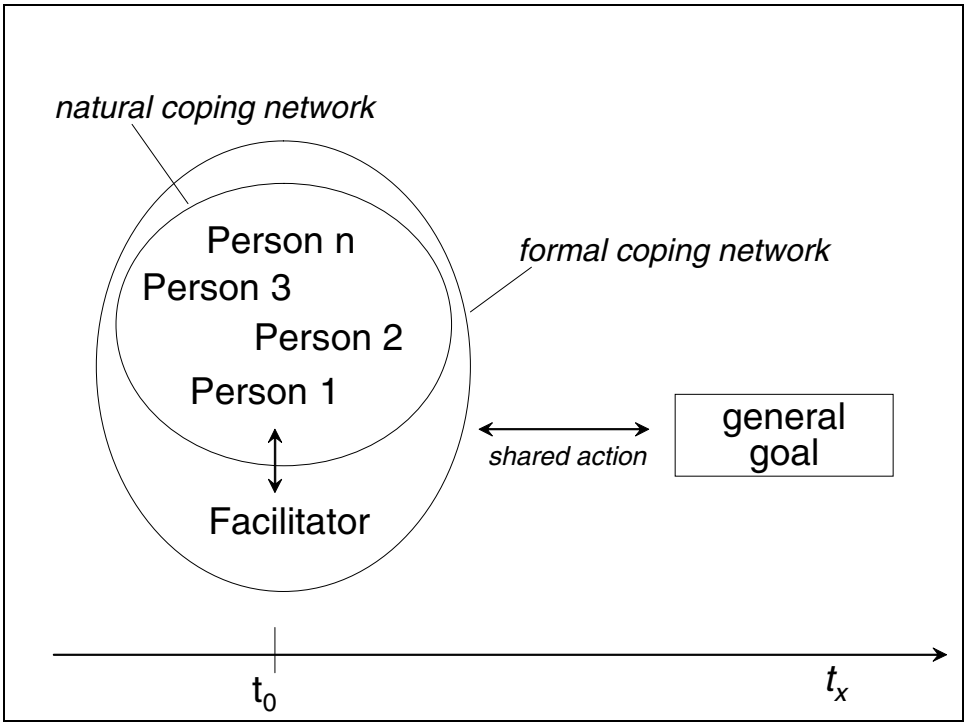

Figure 1. Professional Networking.

the surrounding social relations, which autonomously reorganise or redesign themselves to produce the expected improvement, or solution.

Relational social workers realise that the 'social' (the part of society coping with a problem) can act as their ally in finding the solution. Contrary to positivist or clinical traditions, social workers do not seek technically to repair a disaster that has already happened and perhaps hardened into a rigid structure. Rather, they help a meaningful potential alternative to evolve in a social context. The social worker may collaborate with social relations in two different ways: s/he can make a contribution on a par with all the other parties concerned to find the solution; or s/he may furnish a meta-contribution by supervising the agency arising from within social relations from the outside as well. Networking takes shape as a professional method when a social worker does not directly provide help, but supports helping as it comes into being (Folgheraiter, 2004). The social worker joins the social relations already working in the same direction as s/he is. S/he looks at certain relations, and identifies those that 'work' and produce a positive power in the coping process.

From this perspective, the social worker acts as a facilitator. S/he oils the wheels of a societal dynamism that is already oriented towards a solution, but which is currently blocked or insufficient. The intention is to increase the resilience and capacity for action of the social relations already activated, or which can be activated, in a coping process.

The general scheme of professional networking is presented in Figure 1. This model enables the social worker to construct a mental representation of the natural coping

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network in the specific situation in which s/he is working, and to understand every working circumstance as a shared action (a social network that works).

This model tells us that in every professional social work project:

- The solution is a process that emerges from shared action; that is, from a plural agency that encompasses all the component individual actions, as well as the outcomes of their free interactions within the network.
- The overall agency highlights the role of the facilitator. The social worker joins the natural coping network, but at the same time remains external to it as the 'observer'. A network observed and guided by a facilitator becomes a formal network.
- The acting members of the natural helping network may play different roles, both informal and formal. But they have largely the same status and are autonomous in their action, able to express their voice in the reflexive coping in which they are engaged. A coping network may show different patterns. A coping network may consist of 'homogeneous' persons who share a common problem (in which case it is a self-help/mutual aid group). Or it may be mixed, when it consist of persons with different roles and sensibilities; for example, a family-carer (a mother) a user (the adolescent son with learning difficulties) a voluntary worker, a health practitioner and a natural helper (the parish priest).
- The coping network does not constitute 'hard' reality. It is a sophisticated mental construct created by the social worker/facilitator. Coping actions and contacts between network members are almost always initially dispersed in space/time dimensions. At the start, the social worker connects them up in his/her mind. Then, by means of networking practices, s/he may get them to meet physically and facilitate a reflexive development of their identity as a network. This comes about with an increase in connections and equal exchanges, and perhaps with an increase in openness and mutual trust among persons, as well as in their capacities for action. This means an increase in social capital, which consists of the intelligence and sensitivity of social relations in a given micro social context.
- Shared formal agency begins at time t_0 and is forward-directed. Attention to the causes (personal or structural) of the problem is not a problem for the social worker. The social worker does not look back except to recognise who in the past has already worked towards the shared goal, and how they have done so. By looking forward, the scheme tells us that over time the action will unfold in indeterminate and open fashion, depending on the decisions and reflections that the relations produce. The role of the facilitator is to stimulate the network to concentrate on crucial points of the agency process and proceed by compensating for ignorance with the closer application of reflexivity. The relational practitioner is a reflexive one in Schön's (1983) sense of the term.
- The natural coping network is constructed through selection of the social relations involved in the problem. The social worker decides on the basis of observation those persons involved in the problem who are also involved in its solution and s/he ideally connects only these. People considered members of the coping network are those acting to orient matters towards the common goal supervised by the social worker. Starting from the customer him/herself, anyone who proves to be a co-worker is viewed as a member of the coping network. Conversely, anyone who proves not to be synergic

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towards the common goal – be it the user him/herself, a close family member, or any relationally close person – is not included in the network.

- The double-headed arrow indicates that the facilitator acts towards the network and is open to action by the network towards him/herself. S/he does not seek to modify the internal structure or structured behaviours of persons involved according to his/her standards. S/he acts as a mirror so that relations already directed towards the solution are able to see more clearly what they are doing and how they are doing it. S/he acts responsively to what the network has shown that it wants to choose or do. But this does not imply that his/her professional presence is not also proactive. S/he respects people's decisions, while they remain within the broad direction of the general aim and are not destructive or harmful to the social interactions within the network. His/her role as facilitator entails that s/he must foster any creativity that leads forward, and block or ignore everything that leads backwards, or causes the process to stall.

Networking in the context of child protection

Social workers who must afford child protection are in a situation apparently opposite to the ideal one hypothesised by relational theory. They cannot assume that their goals are the same as those with whom they are in dialogue. By definition, the social relations with which the social worker interacts (abusing parents, for example) are not directed towards the 'good'. The social networks appear to be structures that force the persons involved to act as producers of badness, rather than as agents to overcome it. In the social control project, the social worker cannot operate in line with network members, because their position is not morally/legally acceptable. His/her professional purposes conflict with those with whom s/he needs to engage: the social worker wants the child not to be physically or emotionally abused, while the parents, deliberately or otherwise, constantly perpetrate the abuse. The probation officer wants the prisoner on parole to work and not take drugs, while the prisoner seeks to do so unless prevented by constant supervision and sanctions. The youth worker wants children not to break shop windows or scrawl graffiti on walls, but they repeatedly do so.

The responsibility of the institutional practitioner in social control is constructed in terms of 'blocking' and 'impeding' actions. The worker must diagnose harmful agency and then impede it, using legal instruments and professional techniques. Blocking harmful agency is necessary in many cases. It is important for social workers, as well as the police and the courts, to be engaged in this task (Parton, 1997, 2005). But what is it that distinguishes a social worker from a police officer, when they together seek to combat harmful social agency? Three general competences are usually required of the social worker: (i) diagnosing/assessing the 'bad' and its consequences – for example, determining whether parenting skills are so poor that they put the child at serious risk; (ii) 'lubricating' the compulsory measures enacted by the authorities by means of human relations skills that minimise the suffering those measures may cause; (iii) eliminating the social or relational causes of the harm by engaging in some form of 'therapy', casework or parent training schemes with the family. These functions are important, but can be clumsy and laborious. The hope of diagnosing social risks, or even of ascertaining objective damage, is illusory; either the risks are so blatantly obvious that even the police or neighbours can see for themselves, or they remain only suspicions (Taylor and White, 2000). The human

suffering caused by institutional restrictions is often so drastic (when the children are removed, for example), that no artificial human relations technique is possible. Indeed, 'consoling' techniques are often seen as quackery by their recipients. As for family therapy efforts, the abusing families are so often mixed up with deviant cultures, or so radically different, that attempts to rectify them with authoritarian therapies of the clinical tradition suggest professional hubris.

The essence of social work practice is to develop good agencies rather than to impede bad ones. Many difficulties of social control will be reduced if we can channel social control practices back into the mainstream of social helping. Extinguishing agency is not possible in reality. Those with whom social workers are engaged and whose actions we want to prevent will act in any case, because living is acting. A negative agency is extinguished when another antagonistic one, hopefully better, takes its place. Even if we put someone in prison, sooner or later s/he will be released and will return to the way of life that s/he wants and is able to pursue.

In child protection situations, nothing is only good *or* bad. Besides negative and preventable actions, there may be others that are good and sustainable, and which can be facilitated by the social worker. The general rule of networking is always to look for the good in the social situation observed; the practitioner must always endeavour to look 'beyond' or 'through' the problem and its causes in order to support actions directed towards solutions. Even in situations of severe risk, there may be someone among the people involved who is aware of the situation and who wants to escape from it (Sheppard, 2005). It is often possible to find well-motivated coping actions already begun at some point within the social network and that may have produced results.

In child protection situations, the social worker is not only the guarantor that harmful acts will not be committed (Ferguson, 2004), s/he is also the guarantor that, in a potentially or 'objectively' dangerous situation, pro-social competences and capabilities will be formally recognised and supported. In particular, the worker can find a shared willingness to cooperate to provide protection within pre-existing networks. In a household, for example, there may be a member who represents a danger to be controlled, while others may be motivated to impede abuse. In some cases, the dangerous member him/herself may be aware of his/her problem and be willing to examine and deal with it. Restrictive measures taken by the authorities may, therefore, be a strong external stimulus for a recovery process to begin. Here the social worker finds his/her traditional terrain of non-clinical helping.

Combining the authoritative and prescriptive approach typical of social control with the collaborative and trust-based approach typical of helping work is a familiar problem. But unless an effort is made to do so there is nothing that justifies the presence of a 'social' professional in situations of this kind. To explore this, I provide an example using the general scheme of networking discussed earlier. Faced with the same scenario of child abuse, we can imagine two different coping patterns, and therefore two different shared routes to the solution that a social worker can observe and 'interpret' (see Figure 2).

The upper part of the network illustrates that some of the family are aware of the problem and motivated to deal with it. Only the father and the two brothers are external to the coping network. We do not know whether they fail to see the problem or whether they are aware of it but find the arrangement congenial. Whatever the situation, the constructor of the network excludes them because they do not share the goal of protecting the daughter/sister. They want the problem to remain as it is, or they simply do not see it.

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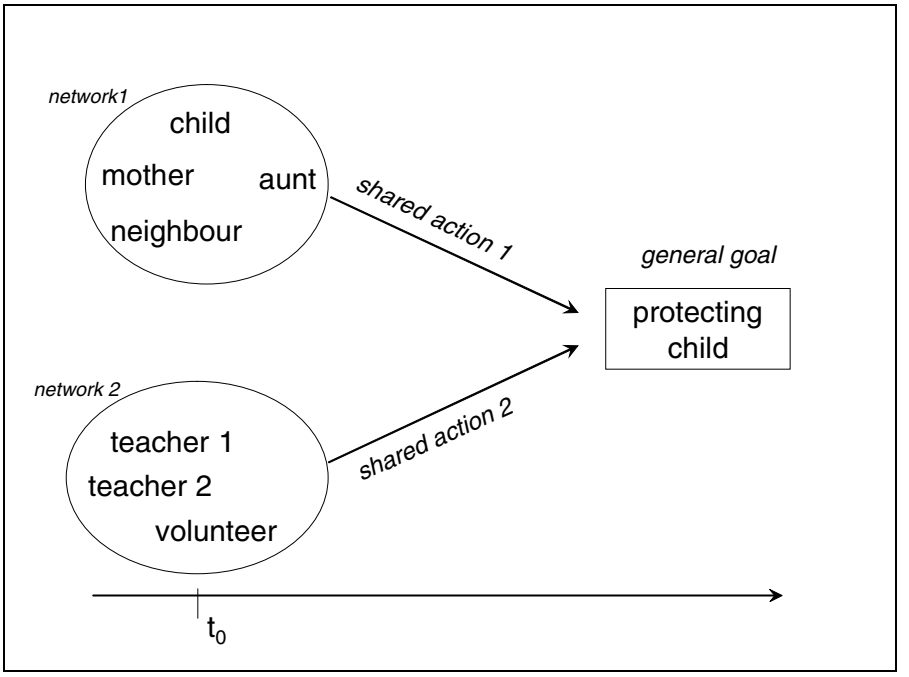

Figure 2. Networking in child protection.

In the former case, they express an intentional perverse delinquent agency and must be stopped with restrictive measures. In the latter, they simply do not express 'good agency'.

The scheme shows that the child too is aware of the problem and perhaps she wants a solution to be found, and so do the mother, the aunt and the neighbour. We can imagine the possible coping interactions. One day the daughter plucked up courage and talked to her mother, who already had her suspicions but did not want to accept the truth. The mother spoke to her sister and then told her friend, the neighbour who, on seeing her preoccupied and tense, had asked what the matter was. The neighbour or the aunt advised her to contact social services, which, with the consent of her daughter, she did. The social worker listened to her story and was convinced that it was his responsibility to share the goals constructed by the persons who contacted him.

In this context, the control action intended to prevent the abuse is spread through a small network and the practitioner has co-workers, including the abused girl. He can discuss with them how to alter family relations and how to sensitise and involve other family members at present 'extraneous' to that goal. The social worker can move in two directions. To change the family's life-style and to stimulate new life-planning; he can connect with all those concerned persons and work with them as valuable partners. To block immediate harmful behaviour, he can act technically on his own by activating the procedures foreseen by the law. The lower part of the scheme shows a different and more awkward possible configuration of the coping network. There is a more distant social setting external to the family that is aware of the problem and in some way motivated to cope with it. The family unit and the neighbourhood do not perceive the problem or do not want to

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recognise it. It may be that the family, including the child herself or her mother, is embedded in an abusing culture that closes its eyes to what is happening, or treats it as normal. Or it may be that an insider is minimally aware, but does everything to keep the abuse concealed. S/he will not take action to change the situation lest this upset an equilibrium and trigger an unstoppable chain of events. The family is committed to hiding and maintaining the status quo, and to defending itself against interfering outsiders. It has no explicit intention to find a solution; the good intention of the external coping network is not its goal.

The aim of protecting the child is established at school. A teacher sees signs of distress and odd behaviour in the child, which she has learnt about on a recent training course. She talks to a colleague and they decide to voice their suspicions to a voluntary worker at the church children's club, which the girl attends. He confirms the perception that the girl is at risk, and together they decide to contact the social worker. One of the teachers makes an appointment, and from the interview he realises that the suspicions are justified. Taking urgent legal measures if necessary, the social worker reconstructs the picture of all the relations oriented to the solution, in which he includes himself and from which he derives evidence that the family is extraneous to the coping process.

The practitioner observes that a small set of social relations has set itself in motion towards improvement. This social network moving in the 'good direction' initially encounters the opposition of a larger set of social relations buttressed by the right to privacy and self-determination. In this case, we therefore have a social worker who engages in classic social work with the external community only. At the same time, he engages in hard and potentially explosive control work on the family, which closes ranks against his unwelcome interference. However, in this case too, the social worker must realise that it is his professional duty not to take it for granted that the family is lost. As a social worker in the full sense, he must be constantly alert for signals that someone in the family has begun to understand and will cooperate. This is the opportunity for the social worker to do networking, and to connect the two presently detached networks. He constructs a coping network, which is deeper and more extensive and perhaps, therefore, better able to handle such a demanding and uncertain task.

Conclusion

Relational social work presents a number of challenges to UK social work theory and practice. Firstly, it asks practioners (and therefore policy makers) to adopt a strength-based approach to helping. Individuals needing support or experiencing difficulty are seen as also holding the capacities and capabilities within their social network to achieve the change that is required. Historically UK social work practice is rooted in a deficit model – it assumes that because the need for help arose, the individual and their network require assessment of weaknesses and remedial interventions. Relational social work suggests instead that the emphasis is placed on capacities to achieve change and harnessing social networks to promote and support change.

Secondly, relational social work raises some tensions and potential contradictions. Whilst the social worker is asked to work within and facilitate the social networks of those experiencing difficulties, the same social worker is still asked to 'gate keep' those suitable for inclusion in the network. This marks out a difference in relational social work from practices such as family group conferences, which assume an inclusive social

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network with very limited social work powers to edit or restrict. The tension between partnership-based practice and social work powers to control are played out in this aspect of relational social work.

Finally, relational social work seeks to enable social work to embrace and work with the broader concepts that this special edition explores. The theory captures the value and possibilities of social networks, but raises real challenges for practices that currently sit within confined parameters of individualism and bureaucratic process.

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