

Interpersonal Justice: The Importance of relationships for child and family social workers

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## **Abstract**

There is still much to learn about what it means to be a child and family social worker. Child and family social workers have a job that often entails making difficult decisions regarding vulnerable children and families in collaboration with other professionals, under stressful conditions in an increasing cost-restrictive climate with diminishing resources. The organisational justice framework has primarily been used to ascertain employee's perceptions of fairness and can be used to explain a variety of organisational behaviours. Here, it was used qualitatively as a framework to structure the research aims of exploring the lived experience of child and family social workers. The results suggest that the relationships social workers have with their peers and managers are significant components to how they manage emotions involved with practice.

Key Words: Child Protection, Interpersonal justice, Relationships, Emotions

## **Introduction**

It has been discussed, and seems to be well known, that there is an overall low morale currently found within the social work workforce (Tham 2007, Healy 2009, Laming 2009, SWTF 2009, Ofsted 2010, Munro 2011, Webb and Carpenter 2012, BASW 2013). The discussion now seems to be heading in the direction as to what social workers do and what they need in order to keep coming to work and maintaining good practice despite this low morale (Kearns and McArdle 2012, Engstrom 2014, Ferguson 2014, Jeyasingham 2016). One of the key themes that has emerged as part of a debate about low morale within the profession, especially child and family social work, is that more recognition of the emotions involved in this work is needed (Ferguson 2005, Ruch 2010a, Ruch 2011, Ingram 2012). Within that, how social workers process and reflect on their emotions is also something that needs attention. It is with this in mind that this research hopes to fill some of that gap in recognising the importance of relationships within the workforce when it comes to exploring and managing emotions within child and family social work practice.

## **Emotions and Social Work**

The social work profession is, by its very nature, involved with and surrounded by emotions. As relationships and interactions with others are central, managing clients' emotions, as well as one's own, are essential components to the role. Ferguson (2005) states there is an 'expressive' dimension to child protection practices that concerns the psycho-social dynamics of the work as they are 'deeply embedded in relationships' (p783). Social workers need to be able to engage with

the emotional content of service user's lives and circumstances and also recognise the impact this may have on themselves and their practice (Morrison 2007, Ingram 2012). Add to this the pressure of workloads, potentially unsafe practice, public scrutiny and the uncertain nature of the work, and it becomes clear that practitioners have to be able to respond to a variety of internal and external emotional issues in order to practice effectively (Waterhouse and McGhee 2009, Ingram 2012).

Part of the working life of a social worker is being exposed to human vulnerability and the accompanying anxieties, fears and uncertainties, therefore, social workers are also at risk of experiencing and absorbing those emotions (Whitaker 2012). Moreover, social workers, service users and carers are situated within professional and societal systems. This can mean not only are social workers dealing with these anxieties directly from individuals, but they are also in a position to be on the receiving end of the projection of society's anxieties regarding anti-social behaviour or moral panics (Ferguson 2005, Taylor et al. 2007, Clapton et al. 2013). It is unsurprising then that previous research has found that social workers have expressed a range of emotions, in addition to anxiety, such as, fear, embarrassment, guilt and vicarious trauma, (Smith et al. 2003, Taylor et al. 2007, Waterhouse and McGhee 2009, Goddard and Hunt 2011).

The organisational contexts that social workers work within adds to the complex nature of emotional labour and social work. Organisations carry considerable stresses due to the emotional nature of the work and the institutional anxiety resulting from the political and public exposure (Morrison 2007). As workers develop the need for self-preservation through the conflicting demands involved in emotional labour in an organisation, they may rely on various defences such as denial, rationalisation, or what is often called 'black humour' (Goddard and Hunt 2011). These defence systems are unconsciously reflected in organisational rituals, processes and systems designed to avoid feelings. Through these systems, it is possible to see how workers' feelings and relational abilities are intertwined with the emotional needs and rules of the organisation (Morrison 2007).

The complexity of the relationship between emotions and organisational life, especially in an emotionally labour intensive workplace such as social work, has been recognised by researchers such as Ruch (2011). Ruch (2011) has focused much research on the importance of "containment" when it comes to working within an emotionally charged profession as child and family social work can be. Ideally, practitioners need to experience emotional containment, organisational containment and epistemological containment as ways to sustain good practice. Supervision, managerial clarity and space to think creatively are all ways practitioners can develop reflective practice and sort through emotions they encounter. What is also mentioned by Ruch (2011) as a key component in the development of ethical and effective practice is the presence of well-developed team relationships, and it is remarkable, considering how almost all social work practice is located within a team environment, that there is limited literature on the role of the team.

With that in mind, this research, exploring the lived experience of child and family social workers, also discovered the place of relationships for social workers in their ability to maintain good practice. As I will discuss below, I utilised an organisational

justice framework in order to learn more about the perceptions child and family social workers held about certain areas of the workplace.

## **Organisational Justice**

Organisational justice is a concept that began to emerge when exploring employee satisfaction, turnover, perceptions of fairness and overall quality of the day to day experience within an organisation (Simpson and Kaminski 2007, Chou 2009, Shi et al. 2009). Introduced by Greenberg (1987), the aim of assessing organisational justice is to gain insight as to how employees perceive fairness within the workplace. This includes looking at perceptions of actions, decisions, allocation of resources, rewards and punishments and can be used to explain a variety of organisational behaviours (Greenberg 1987, Greenberg 1990, Simpson and Kaminski 2007, Chen et al. 2008, Jordan and Turner 2008, Kim et al 2012). Researchers have used the organisational justice framework to help explain workplace participation, perceptions of respect and trust, absenteeism, job satisfaction, quality of relationships and workplace aggression (Jordan and Turner 2008, Bakhshi et al 2009, Chou 2009, St-Pierre and Holmes 2010).

Using the organisational justice framework enables an understanding of employee's sense of how fair an organisation is and how this manifests in workplace behaviours. Due to the evolving nature of economic and political landscapes and societal priorities, the framework and concept of organisational justice needs to be flexible. However, currently, the organisational justice framework remains a useful tool for ascertaining employee perceptions. The core belief of the framework is that people primarily evaluate their workplace on judgments focussed on content (distributive justice), process (procedural justice) and interactions (interpersonal justice and informational justice) (Greenberg 1987, Chou 2009).

Briefly, there are four components to the organisational justice framework. Closely related to equity theory, *distributive justice* is related to perceptions of pay, benefits, workload, promotions and so on, with individuals varying in how they perceive they should be rewarded or compensated (Clay-Warner et al. 2005, Loi et al. 2006, Chou 2009). Chi and Han (2008) found that employees with high perceptions of distributive justice may also perceive their organisation more favourably.

*Procedural justice*, refers to perceptions of fairness when decisions are made. Whether new procedures are communicated accurately, appear to be ethical, there is a system for employees to complain, and various opinions are consulted are all elements of procedural justice (Eskew 1993, Clay Warner et al. 2005, Loi et al 2006, St-Pierre and Holmes 2010). Perceptions of positive procedural justice have been found to be related to an employee having a strong sense of organisational commitment as it focuses on day-to-day operations (Loi et al. 2006). Greenberg (1990) also believes that perceptions of procedural justice are influenced and connected to the way employees are treated by decision makers within an organisation. These judgments and perceptions however can be examined in more detail by looking at the two final components of the framework.

Together, *interpersonal* and *informational* justices are often considered as interactional justice. This is the area of the organisational justice framework that involves the human or social aspect. It focuses on the quality of treatment and behaviours between employees, supervisors and peers and how information is communicated (Simpson and Kaminski 2007, Randeree and Malik 2008, Chou 2009). Colquitt (2001) suggested that interactional justice be divided into the two distinctions that are more commonly used now of interpersonal and informational justice. Informational justice focuses on the quality and quantity of information and communication primarily around procedures (Chou, 2009, Shi et al., 2009). Interpersonal justice relates to how employees are treated during day-to-day organisational procedures, with a focus on whether supervisors and management treat each other, and more junior employees, with dignity and respect.

A component then of this research, was looking at how front line child and family social workers perceive the relationships with their peers, supervisors and other professionals. Simons and Roberson (2003) cite Bies and Moag (1986) when identifying four criteria for fair interpersonal treatment. These criteria are the extent to which decision-making authorities are honest, respectful, and considerate in communicating decisions and the extent to which they justify the rationale for any decisions being made. Perceived interpersonal justice has been found to be associated with satisfaction with one's supervisor, organisational commitment and intent to leave (Chou 2009).

I have previously discussed (Engstrom 2014) some of the links that can be made when using the organisational justice framework to gain further insight into the working lives of child and family social workers, and so will not elaborate here. However, what I hope to highlight now is the importance of relationships for those workers that emerged out of the research within the interpersonal justice component of the framework.

## **Methods**

The field work for this research began by making contact with two Scottish local authorities in September 2012. There were seventeen interviews in total with the first interview taking place in March 2013 and the final interview completed in August 2013.

Non-probability purposive sampling was used due to needing a specialised group of respondents that were relevant to the research aims and could yield useful and relevant information (Bryman 2016). Therefore, contacts were made with a call for social workers in child and family teams to respond. Unfortunately, the sample is unrepresentative of all social workers, as it only brings forward those that responded. Social workers that may not currently have any concerns with their workplace, or who have no interest in research are not part of the sample, yet this would be an important group of people to talk to. Therefore the sample is not as diverse as it potentially could be, nor fully allows the breadth of experience that could be beneficial when discussing perceptions and experiences.

In total, of the 17 social workers that came forward, 13 respondents came from Local Authority A, while the remaining 4 came from Local Authority B. Of the 17 individuals, 3 were Team Leaders, 5 were Senior Practitioners (as defined by their Local Authority) and the remaining 9 were Child and Family Social Workers. The gender difference, although not a focus for this research, was 9 women and 8 men. The length of time in employment ranged from 18 months to 23 years with the average length of time in a current post being 11 years.

As the primary method of data collection was structured in-depth interviews, the most beneficial way of analysing the transcripts was through thematic analysis. The process of thematic analysis was comprised of different stages, including reading and rereading of transcripts, looking for repetitions relevant to the research focus and theory-related literature, coding and sorting of data, and reviewing and justifying themes or patterns identified (Bryman 2016). By structuring the interview schedule in a way that distinguished each theme of organisational justice, a separate analysis for each was able to occur.

As a reminder, the four themes of organisational justice are; distributive justice, procedural justice, informational justice and interpersonal justice. Within each of these themes however, sub-themes began to emerge. A previously created document had a list of key words that had been constructed through the guidance of the organisational justice literature in order to assist with coding. As qualitative interviews are a fluid process, there were times when aspects of different organisational justice themes would emerge in an area of the interview that was somewhat unexpected. In other words, all of the organisational themes were present throughout the entire interview, not just within the confines of their respective place in the interview schedule.

As Interpersonal Justice, in this case, is related to relationships and interactions between the social workers, their peers and their supervisors. The following terms were used as a base when coding and analysing the interviews: Respect, dignity, politeness, inappropriate behaviour, praise, relationship(s), bullying, treatment, sensitivity and support.

## **Results**

The finding that elements of interpersonal justice were interspersed throughout the interviews suggests this was a key aspect for social workers, which makes sense on two levels. One being that as social workers, relationships are central to their line of work so they may be more attuned to the significance and place of relationships on a day to day basis. Second, as human beings, we are social creatures and interpersonal justice will be evident in any number of settings, however in this context, the importance of relationships often gets pushed aside in more managerialist settings as is evident by some of the responses by the social workers. A high level of interpersonal justice would suggest a strong sense of trust amongst employees (Colquitt et al. 2012) and as evident throughout the results, there does not always seem to be a strong sense of trust amongst the participants towards their employer, in this case, the local authority.

Some of the key elements of interpersonal justice emerging from the respondent's interviews included their perception of praise by the local authority or their specific

team, how individuals treated each other and their perception of relationships and their importance, within the organisation.

### *Praise*

Praise and verbal recognition for a particular achievement can make a difference as to how one perceives value (Scottish Executive 2005). It seems possible that social workers often go into the job anticipating they will not get a lot of praise, due to the stigma associated with the profession. Therefore, they may not expect praise, nor necessarily know what to do with it when it arrives. In the case of these particular social workers, praise seemed to primarily come informally. There was also a perception that upper management did not understand the work the social workers were performing, they were removed from it. When it did come from upper management, the respondents perceived the praise as tokenistic and insincere:

it's a tricky one because everyone likes praise, but I think peer praise is more valuable than from a higher level, if (manager), came down to our office and said you're all doing terribly well, well done, I think we'd feel a bit patronised and not particularly value that part of view, whereas other people that are doing the same thing, and know how hard it is, I think praise from them seems more real

There was an underlying feeling however, that although the social workers didn't always receive praise, or were unsure as to how to define a good piece of work that would result in praise, some of them just wanted to be appreciated more for the work they were doing and commitment they had to the job:

I think there is a recognition saying, 'you've done a good piece of work, can we use that as an example' so that certainly does happen, ehm but I suppose it's quite hard, because we all work these individual cases and how do we come together as a team and look at what we do in terms of in a more meaningful way and what's good work rather than just statistics and number of cases, number of referrals and maybe we could be better at that

One could argue that it is difficult to find an appropriate way to extrinsically reward social workers for the work they do, however finding a way to praise the work being done could reflect a degree of politeness and dignity that these respondents are stating is missing (Bakhshi et al. 2009). Defining what is good practice or a good outcome is not simple when dealing with complex behavioural situations, therefore it is difficult to find an appropriate way to praise social workers and more research would need to be done with practicing social workers in order to explore what that might look, sound and feel like.

### *Interpersonal Treatment*

Social workers have to deal with complexity and uncertainty in the forms of human behaviour not only in the context of their service users, but also with their colleagues. This involves more than establishing they have respectful relationships with each other, but it is also about how those relationships are manifested and maintained (or not) on a day to day basis.

The respondents stated that generally speaking, they had positive interpersonal relationships and treated each other well in their respective teams. One social worker put it simply by saying that she wouldn't be there if she wasn't treated well by her team. There was also a good amount of reciprocated teasing or 'banter' between the team members and the social workers said they appreciated this level of camaraderie. However, there was also the acknowledgement that due to the nature of the working environment, there would be some instances of negative talk behind people's back:

...banter absolutely, that's part and parcel of just working in an environment, but I'm quite sure people say lots behind your back, but it never comes to my ears and so I don't feel like I work in a department that bitches and snipes and bullies and intimidates, no I've never had that sense, from that point of view I enjoy working for the council

Amongst all the positive stories of supportive colleagues, there were instances of bullying and poor treatment by others within the team. Incidents of workplace bullying are nothing new, however it seems out of place to be occurring in a profession that values ethical practice (Collins 2001, BASW 2012). The accounts of bullying varied from respondents hearing there was bullying within the department but not experiencing it directly, to one particular respondent who was bullied by her team leader. This was dealt with appropriately by the manager of her team, however she continued to seek counselling, experience low self-esteem and low self-confidence as a result. This particular respondent said she still loved her job, however there was a culture of acceptance about being treated negatively:

my colleagues treat me very respectfully most of the time, there's an awful culture of bitchiness in this office and I presume in others as well, which I hate, and I challenge it and I don't think I get appreciated for it, um so that's not great, um social workers are a bunch of children sometimes, honestly we're so immature um my clients treat me like crap and actually I don't feel like that's dealt with very well um I think again it's tolerated too much

This is echoed by other respondents, who said although they were generally well treated by their team members, it was the treatment by senior management and other professionals that was insincere at times, discussed further in the next section:

...it never feels sincere um and you know in moments when senior managers come to our team meetings to you know place a hand across the sea to reach out to us and I always end up feeling irate inside rather than comforted and acknowledged

How people treat others is related to not only their own levels of self-esteem but also how they are able to react to other's communication styles. Working in a high stress environment, will influence both of these components as well as the impact of other emotions that may be present. How social workers treat each other within the workplace is more than just a reflection of interpersonal justice but will also have an impact on how they are interacting with service users and may mirror dynamics within families they work with.



## *Relationships*

Throughout the entire interview process, relationships were discussed. As previously mentioned, this was not limited to the section of the interview focused on interpersonal justice. There were three main areas of relationships that social workers discussed; relationships with their peers, their supervisor, and other professionals.

## *Peers*

The importance of peer support within the team was seen as the most significant component. The team social workers were situated in is where they might find support, mentorship and comic relief. Every social worker interviewed highlighted the importance of the support they received from their peers in the office environment:

Maybe in other professions it's different... I don't know....when you've got people screaming in your ear on home visits you know people try to keep an nice atmosphere in the office because it would be unbearable

The support from the team was mentioned in the context of the rewards of having positive relationships, recognition for the work being done, and collaborating and working through difficult cases. In other words, relationships were mentioned in every aspect of the work that social workers have to do. This has resonances with Ingram (2013) who found that when it comes to peer support, the importance of having this support physically close to you was also reflected on in the context of being frustrated with the open plan offices that are being implemented in many of the geographical areas the social workers work in:

We actually gain quite significant peer support from the people that are permanently seated around us who know about your cases, cause they hear about you talking about them and are able to reflect and able to help you... Because actually they'll all end those peer support relationships which are actually more important than the supervisory relationship and the issue is going to be that you're not going to have social workers that are supported in the moment, you might have them supported three weeks later, and I think, you know, people will just be going off sick, and even more than they are now, because you will just feel so alone

## *Supervision*

The relationship that a social worker has with their manager, or team leader, was mentioned by many of the respondents as being important to their stress levels as well as their workload and overall perception of the role. Some of the respondents mentioned their direct line manager knew elements of their personal life and found this helpful in the amount of support they received. In contrast, others mentioned they did not want their supervisor to know what was going on in their personal life:

I've been extremely fortunate to work for him actually, very fortunate, I wouldn't necessarily talk to him about anything in my personal life, I would find, you know and I think some supervisory relationships are a bit more like that, that you could talk about stuff from outside of work, whereas we don't

The very aspect of the respondents mentioning their supervisors when asked about management, provides insight as to who they perceive as the most important person in a managerial role they interact with. This is to be expected as the importance of the supervisory relationship has been discussed as a significant component of effective practice and addressing any concerns the practitioners may have (Beddoe 2010).

### *External Relationships*

Finally, although only mentioned by three social workers, the relationship with those that are not social work practitioners was brought up. These were usually in a negative context and were closely aligned with the perceptions of the status of the social workers in comparison to other professions:

I'll tell you the people that don't appreciate us, is the children's hearing, the children's hearing is um they treat us really badly, we get a really hard time from them and our opinion is completely lost, they just don't I mean I don't know why I bother writing my reports sometimes because they just, they're so biased by the presence of the lawyer, a weeping mother um or a kid saying I want to go home

These descriptions and perceptions of interpersonal justice illustrate how important the relational aspect of social work is, not only with service users, but with all individuals that come in contact with the profession.

### **Discussion**

Overall, it can be seen that the respondents placed a high value on the relationships that are found within the workplace. This was evidenced by the constant emergence of the topic of relationships throughout the entire framework as opposed to being limited within the interpersonal justice subsection. This focus on relationships and the human component of not only the work social workers had to do with service users, but also within the organisation, was where it became evident that there was more information being given than the organisational justice framework set out to explore.

Employing the organisational justice framework tells us that the social workers place a high level of importance on relationships within the workplace and how they are treated by other professionals, as well as by their clients. This research has also allowed a glimpse into the various elements where dissatisfaction is manifested, and the importance of peers and the team a social worker is placed in, as a way of alleviating the dissatisfaction. One way to think about this importance of peer relationships within the workplace for child and family social workers is to place it in the context of relationship-based practice.

Relationship-based practice pays attention to the detail and significance of the relationship dynamics, components and challenging factors (Ruch 2010a). It recognises that the professional relationship is an important key resource and also involves trying to make sense of the less rational sides of social work relationships. Relationship-based practice understands that unspoken emotions, especially

powerful feelings such as anxiety, fear and shame, may affect the judgement of the professional and hinder the process of the work being done (Ruch 2010a).

A central component to relationship-based practice is understanding how anxiety plays a role in response to working in uncertainty, ambiguity and distress (Ruch 2010b). As such, anxiety may play a role in how individuals react or respond to a situation and therefore may influence direct practice if not addressed (Ruch 2010b). In order to help combat these strong emotions social workers may be experiencing, it is essential that sources of support are available to the practitioners. Linking this to the results of my research then, it is possible to see how the role of peer relationships within a social work team are important to help ease the anxiety the social workers may be experiencing.

Relationship-based practice between practitioner and service user means acknowledging the emotions that both individuals are bringing to the work. Social workers then need to have a variety of support to identify those emotions and perform the emotional labour necessary to sustain good practice. Social workers are encouraged to be aware of how they are bringing their self to practice but it is also important for them to be aware of their use of self in relationships (Ward 2010a). Colleagues can help each other gain insight into individual patterns of emotion management and ways of interacting in practice as they spend time together and are able to see how each other perform under stress. They can then bring this awareness to co-workers in order to modify any patterns or thought processes to produce better outcomes for service users as well as the individual social worker (Ward 2010a).

Unfortunately, these peer relationships and support of a team based environment are being impacted by the move to more open plan offices (Jeyasingham 2016). Jeyasingham (2016) conducted an ethnographic study on children's social workers to explore the potential impact of moving to more open plan offices and found negative consequences. This is due to a reduction in opportunities to have reflective discussion and social workers being more isolated. The social workers found it helpful in the previous office layout to have peers close by they could discuss cases with, and that could provide support if a phone call had been especially challenging. Frequently engaging with individuals that are surrounded by uncertainty and stress, and that bring heightened feelings of pain, fear and anger will inevitably impact a social worker (Ward 2010b). From an attachment theory perspective, these peer relationships may provide the "secure base" the social workers need in order to discuss work in detail, take risks and know they have somewhere safe to come back to reflect on and process the potentially emotionally difficult situations they encounter.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we can now begin to see how the relationships social workers have with their peers and overall social work team are important in order to not only help contain and manage the emotional aspect of the work and work environment, but may also be a source of pain. Dempsey and Halton (2016) have also recently found that developing peer support groups among child and family social workers provided

the opportunity to not only address professional development issues, but also discuss and work through emotional tensions. The findings presented in this article contribute to the knowledge we are gaining about what support is needed for practicing social workers, recognising the need to explore these potentially complex relationships further.

The findings have implications for direct social work practitioners, practice teachers, educators and managers. Providing the space and opportunity for social work practitioners to develop peer relationships, could be a way to help reflect on the emotional labour and management that social workers are performing. Having peers around them that also have knowledge of their cases could also help practitioners have an alternative knowledge base and support network if a direct supervisor is not available to them.

Practice teachers and social work educators can promote the importance of peer relationships while students are on placement and still within the classroom. By encouraging these developments early on, by the time students are qualified, they could then be better prepared to seek out these relationships and workplace support networks.

Social workers acknowledge the importance of the relationship between practitioners and service users, as well as within a service users own situation and support network. It makes sense then that we apply that knowledge to the workplace and recognise the importance of the relationships practitioners have with each other. There is still more work to be done in this area though, not only in child and family social work but in all areas of social work practice, and in evaluating the breadth of impact these relationships have on practice.

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