

# Reflective Practice

## A Model for Supervision and Practice in Social Work

FULL VERSION

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Published by:  
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First Published May 2015

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ISBN 978-0-9557755-8-1

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## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the following people: members of the **\*steering group** and, in particular, Mrs Marian O'Rourke and Ms Evelyn Magee; and all the staff who participated so fully in the research.

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# Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the Model for Reflective Practice and Supervision in Social Work. Reflective practice is one of the core tenets of the professional social work role. It is important that social workers are able to show how, when and where reflection is used to inform and improve practice. Having in place a model that has been developed with the support of social work students, practitioners, managers, supervisors and educators across Northern Ireland is a significant step forward for the profession.

NISCC promotes the development of quality practice and supports the view that standards drive up quality. Having a model that supports best practice standards for social work across the health and social care, justice, education, voluntary and independent sectors is a welcome development that will have a positive impact on the quality of services delivered to vulnerable people in our communities.

Having identified reflective practice as an area that would benefit from additional resources, NISCC commissioned Professor Stan Houston from Queen's University Belfast, to develop a model that could be used at qualifying and post qualifying levels, in practice and professional supervision in all settings across Northern Ireland to enhance social workers' practice and improve outcomes for service users. In collaboration with Professor Houston, NISCC established a steering group of key partners who contributed to the development of the model by bringing their extensive range of skills and experience to the process. The development process has also been supported by engagement with a wide range of social workers at key stages in their careers from a cross-section of practice settings throughout the region.

**The DHSSPS 10 year strategy for social work, launched in April 2012: Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing, A Strategy for Social Work in Northern Ireland, 2012-2022, was launched in 2012 and sets out a range of strategic priorities that include: “adding value/delivering outcomes; promoting a culture of continuous improvement and a focus on demonstrating the outcomes and learning from practice”. This model for reflective practice will directly support and make a valuable contribution to this culture of continuous improvement. We are confident that social workers, their employers and educators will be keen to embed the model in their culture and use it to underpin good governance of supervision and safe and effective practice.**

**This model promotes social work as a profession that is underpinned by standards of practice as well as requisite knowledge and skills. Use of the model provides a structure and framework that supports professional development and encourages evidence-based practice. It is critical that social workers take responsibility for their professionalism and their professional practice. Reflective practice is a core element of social work and use of a standardised model strengthens professional identity. Improved standards of reflective practice also enhance the worker’s competence and confidence and consequently contribute to better outcomes for service users.**

**I want to congratulate Professor Houston in leading on the development of this model for reflection in social work practice and supervision and to thank the steering group for their commitment to this project. The implementation of the model will be of significant value and will have considerable impact on the profession of social work in Northern Ireland. In doing so the model will contribute to improving the lives of service users, their families and the communities in which they live.**



**Colum Conway  
Chief Executive  
Northern Ireland Social Care Council**



Chapter 1

# Introduction

**John is a 32 year old man living on a public housing estate in Belfast noted for its high level of crime and pockets of squalor. John's early childhood was marred by loss and change. His mother had been in care as a child. The identity of his father remains unknown. John's mother was unable to look after him as a baby, often going out with friends and drinking heavily. Eventually, social services were contacted and established that John was being severely neglected leading to non-organic failure-to-thrive.**

After several short-term placements in foster care, John was eventually adopted at the age of 5. However, after 2 years this arrangement broke down due to his demanding behaviour. Following disruptions in two subsequent foster care placements, John was admitted to a residential home as a teenager and eventually ended up in secure accommodation due to absconding and placing himself and others at risk. After leaving care, John drifted in and out of various hostels in the city centre.

Due to a poor experience of school, where he was bullied and, in his view, labelled by teachers as a non-achiever and trouble maker, he left with no qualifications. With the economic recession, he failed to secure any meaningful employment. Declining mental health in the face of these hardships led to a referral to a community psychiatrist and mental health social worker. The only source of comfort for John, throughout all of this were his interests in traditional Irish music, sports and sporadic contact with a maternal aunt and uncle.

John currently lives in a high rise block of flats. His social worker, Jane, is very concerned because various individuals known to the police for drug-related crimes, have been seen frequenting his flat on a regular basis.

Jane is finding contact with John very challenging due to his secretiveness about his associations and lifestyle. Jane is 23 years of age and has just qualified as a social worker. She was brought up in a very stable, middle class home. As a teenager she attended a prestigious grammar school, achieved good A Level results and went on to university to attain a first class honours degree in social work.

Jane identifies with the Protestant community and is very involved in her local church.

In reviewing this brief, fictitious scenario, it is evident that both individuals' psychological, social, cultural and economic backgrounds are significantly different. Furthermore, their respective experience of institutions have not in any way been similar as shown in the types of school they attended and the outcomes thereof. How does this set of differences impact on the quality and meaningfulness of the interaction between them?



How does John feel about interacting with a social worker who differs from him in terms of gender, age, class, culture and religious background? How does Jane feel as a social worker trying to engage John when their backgrounds have followed such dissimilar trajectories? John's current micro world of social interactions raise concerns in marked contrast to Jane's benign friendships both in work and within her church; how does this shape their respective day-to-day well-being and is this an area Jane consciously 'tunes into' when preparing to interview John?

John's early attachment to his caregivers has been markedly insecure while Jane's has offered stability. To what extent does this shape Jane's reaction to John and vice-versa? To what degree are these issues raised in professional supervision?

The questions just posed are indicative of the practice of reflexivity: a cognitive and emotionally intelligent process involving conscious scrutiny of how our personal, psychosocial characteristics and experience shape the way we view and react to others given their experience may be widely different compared to our own. It is vital for social workers to build reflexivity into their daily practice for a number of reasons. Firstly, without reflexive awareness, we can succumb to biased or distorted thinking, failing to take account of wider perspectives or privileging our most cherished views which may not be accurate.

Secondly, we can reproduce oppressive structures when we fail to consciously appraise the interplay between the psychological and social domains of life. Patriarchy, misogyny, racism, disablism, labelling, stereotyping, sectarianism, classism, ethnocentrism and so on remain as powerful forces in social life.

Thirdly, we know from a barrage of literature (for example, Ruch et al., 2010) that service users value social work approaches showing sensitivity, empathy, and attempts to construct and sustain relationships. Moreover, they applaud social workers who attempt to connect with the meaning in their lives.

Lastly, reflexivity fosters insight into risk and need in people's lives, how to safeguard and protect them more fully and sensitively, promoting their welfare more comprehensively.

Consequently, it forms a vital tool in professional supervision and enabling others more generally whether through practice teaching, mentoring early career staff, line managing or through qualifying and post-qualifying training. Reflexivity feeds into social care governance by contributing to an awareness of what makes for best practice taking account of the myriads of different scenarios and problems presenting every day for social work attention.

Put this way, reflexivity sounds so simple and effortless. Yet, when we return to our fictitious case example at the start of this introduction, we see very clearly that social life is inherently complex and multifaceted. Social workers need to be conscious of the 'psychological', 'social', 'cultural' and 'economic' spheres to make reflexivity happen. People are shaped by their unique 'psychobiography' (how they have progressed through their life-course), the daily relationships they enter and exit, the organisations they interface with and the wider cultural symbols shaping the meanings they take for granted. Importantly, the economy, indirectly and sometimes directly, radically affects life outcomes and opportunities. So, we need conceptual frameworks to help structure and guide the process of reflexivity - otherwise it will remain a noble aspiration rather than a daily, embedded, cognitive practice.

The author has developed one such model as set out in this monograph. It is distinctive and original in that it draws on a range of sociological theory and, in particular, significantly re-works Derek Layder's (2006) 'Theory of Social Domains' to make it more accessible and relevant for social work. Layder thinks of social life as being influenced by one's personal, psychological experience throughout the life-course, the range of social interactions we engage in, the formal institutions moulding our social activity and the range of cultural and economic resources at our disposal.

I have developed these areas to a significant extent by identifying them as a set of inter-linked, yet separate domains of experience, categorised as: (a) psychobiography (b) relationship (c) culture (d) organisation and (e) politics/economy (see Figure 1 below). Power is central to them all (see section on 'Interlinked Concepts').

**Figure 1 - The Five Domains**



In the following chapters, each of these domains is described in turn, exploring their key component parts. In the final chapter, I show how the domains can be used as part of a reflexive process to enable others in social work. Thus, the reflexive model is apposite for professional supervision, practice teaching, mentoring and education and training. To reiterate, the model is avowedly sociological, putting the 'social' at the heart of social work.

## How to Use the Model

**It is not realistic to use the model in its entirety in one session with a student or member of staff on your team. Rather than that, one or two of the domains – or even parts of them, should be used selectively across a range of sessions. In other words, the model should be used flexibly, pragmatically and in a phased manner. Not everything has to be covered at once. Thus, you may want to privilege one or more of the domains over others depending on the emergent issues facing either you or a service user. For instance, a social worker might be dealing with a concerning case where there are attachment issues. Here, the domain of psychobiography can be used to make sense of what is occurring and reflect on the core issues. Or, it could be that a social work student wants to reflect on how organisational procedures are impacting on her practice. In this case, she might draw on the domain of organisations as a number of theories of organisational processes are set out there. In supervision, the social worker and supervisor will be pragmatic about what needs to be covered and what sections are pertinent or otherwise.**

Over time, though, you may want to ensure that all the domains are covered to some extent. This will mean you have reflected holistically over a significant period of time and grasped the model in its entirety. For instance, it could be the case that a student on placement will have covered most or all of the domains by the time he has concluded the placement or a social worker has understood and applied the full range at the end of her assessed year in practice.

The message is this: start with your practice and the most pressing issues facing you. Then go to the model and choose which section or domain(s) is most appropriate. However, it is sometimes necessary to widen the net and look beyond your immediate focus.

We sometimes privilege our face-to-face interaction with service users and this is understandable. Yet, this domain is shaped and influenced by much wider domains such as what is happening in the economy.

Some domains will appear to be much more familiar than others but the unfamiliar ones may highlight 'blind-spots' in our reflection. They are the ones not to forget. So, be selective in the here-and-now but also aim to be holistic over time.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a white ceramic mug with a colorful floral pattern. The person is wearing a dark, textured sweater. The background is softly blurred, showing the person's face and hair. The overall mood is warm and intimate.

Chapter 2

# **The Domain of Psycho Biography**

# Areas Covered:

- **Narrative**
- **Identity**
- **Emotion**
- **Life-course**

## Introduction

**This domain highlights a person's life path as it progresses along a trajectory through time and space in the social world. In other words, it establishes a person's unique biographical history as it has unfolded from birth to death. It also chiefly links with how significant events have impacted on the person psychologically. What is of concern here is the effect of loss, change, transition, ageing, illness (mental and physical), disability, sensory impairment, psychological trauma, crisis, estrangement, re-union, and opportunities for growth and development.**

Within this existential continuum every person's life history will be unique because of the particular events and contexts experienced and also because of his or her singular psychological reaction to them. No two people will experience the social world in the same way nor will they react to it in a similar fashion. While we are a product of external social influences, they never completely erode individuality. As such, social actors live both inside and outside society.

Critically, people hold private desires, emotions, wishes, intentions and motivations. Moreover, as Anthony Giddens (2006) reminds us, they exercise reflection to make choices and are therefore not exclusively bound by socialisation nor societal expectations. People use skills to alter their social circumstances. Clearly, they are not programmed androids.

But we are not all endowed with the same transformative potential. Some adapt to chronic illness admirably while others become debilitated through no fault of their own.

A specified number find strategies to maximise their life chances and opportunities in the face of crippling poverty while a particular cohort might succumb to learned helplessness and alienation. Clearly, the notion of resilience is pertinent here both in terms of innate dispositions (such as emotional intelligence) and also relational, dynamic factors (such as the level of social support).

With these fundamental tenets in mind, I contend there are four related theoretical constructs underpinning the domain of psychobiography, namely: (a) narrative (b) identity (c) emotion and (d) the life-course. Each of them is addressed overleaf.

# Narrative

**The construct of narrative refers to the story we build up about ourselves, others, our past and future lives. For some people such stories can be oppressive in that they construct events in a negative, disabling manner. For others, narrative can be more flexible, open to change and adaptation and generally telling positive stories about the life-course even in the midst of trauma or other unfortunate events.**

They are our stories about us, the vehicles through which we make sense of our life's journey, its ups and downs, high and low points, eddies and currents, periods of inertia and creativity.

There are a number of dimensions underpinning the idea of narrative. The first is that social actors are naturally inclined to develop stories, particularly of an autobiographical kind. These stories might be highly selective depending on the stage of the life-cycle. Often, they are about the reconstructed past and the imagined future. Secondly, narratives have the effect of integrating a person's life – often giving it a coherent meaning.

Disparate ideas about the past and meanings attached to significant events, come together in the narrative. Even though a person's past might evoke contradictory meanings, narrative serves to integrate memories allowing the person to experience himself as a unitary being. This integrating function of narrative also links separate historical events in a person's life.

It does so by providing causal explanations for why important changes have occurred over time. This sometimes has the effect of giving personal history a direction, a purpose, a central intention.

All of this is about attributing meaning to specific events and also the totality of experience. Through a process of autobiographical reasoning we generate meaning about life.

Thirdly, narratives are communicated within social relationships. It is true that people tell stories about themselves and their lives to others. Narratives are therefore social and relational constructs. We can only really make sense of a person's narrative within the context of the teller and the listener of the narrative.

In many situations, the narrator tries to anticipate what she thinks her audience may want to hear, and changes the narrative to meet this expectation.

So, people will narrate their personal stories according to time, place, audience and social context. In fashioning such accounts, people tend to relay their most memorable events at the time they happened and re-tell them later on. Related to this point, meaning is conveyed in the content of what is said but also in the manner in which it is conveyed. Emotion is a salient facet of personality in this context.

## Remember...

Narrative refers to the meaningful story we tell about our lives.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Older people who would benefit from reminiscence and reflection on their life-histories, when they have experienced significant loss, change or crisis;
- Children and young people who have very fragmented life-histories. Thus, the idea of narrative can underpin life-history work;
- Adults with mental health issues who need to re-frame their understanding of themselves and their past in a more positive way.

# Identity

Much has been written about identity in the social sciences. It is at the heart of who and what we are, shaping a view of ourselves, others and the social world in general. Nevertheless, it is a slippery, 'catchall' term suggesting both similarity and difference. More specifically, identity refers to the common characteristics I share with a social group and is, in this sense, a form of identification with like-minded others; but, at the same time, identity indicates my unique nature, my essential difference from others (Jenkins, 2003). There is therefore a tension between my 'social self' and my 'individual self'.

People may also seek multiple identifications with various social groupings on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, disability and stage within the life-cycle. Such identifications should be seen as exhibiting a fluid, social process tying the domain of psychobiography with the other more socially-oriented domains (covered later in this text). Another way of putting this is to say that social identity is a social accomplishment, something that one 'does' rather than what one 'has' as a fixed possession.

It is important at this point to reflect somewhat wider and remember that identity is a product of our inheritance. In other words, our family genealogy, or its absence, plays a determining role in who we think we are. More than that, we are also shaped by kinship. This refers not only to biological relations but to a whole network of ties that render meaning to our lives. In this connection, it can be argued that we engage not so much in personal reflection about our identities but more in relational reflection; that is, thinking about ourselves within the context of significant relationships in the past, whether relating to the family or wider kinship.

A sociological focus on identity must also recognise the significance of social class in moulding one's sense of self. Class distinctions, divisions and inequalities remain persistent realities as income differentials continue to widen under the contemporary economic climate (see the Domain of Politics/Economy).

Class affects who we are in cultural and symbolic terms. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued it shapes our cultural tastes, our store of memories, how we walk, talk, eat and carry ourselves in terms of our physical presentation.

Class generates a way of seeing the world. Importantly, middle and upper class people are, in many ways, different to working class people in the identities they possess with regard to the aforementioned areas.

Notably, the working class is sometimes presented in an invidious way by certain elements of the press and linked on occasions with moral panics about feral young people on housing estates and feckless single parent mothers (Lawler, 2008).

Finally, it is important to conclude with some thoughts about the 'politics of identity'. What is meant here is that minority and disadvantaged social groups may well exercise their collective power to challenge externally imposed, oppressive accounts of their identities. The clearest examples relate to the themes of disability, race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Identity politics turn around claims for the rightful recognition of different identities in society. In such movements, solidarity and group identification are primary impulses within protest and group activism.

## Remember...

Identity refers to our sense of self and also our identification with similar social groups based on social class, religious, cultural, age-related affiliations.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Young people in the care system who have negative identities as reflected in poor self-esteem, lack of confidence and self-respect. Therapeutic work with these young people should aim to develop a positive identity;
- People with a disability who experience shame or stigma. It is vital that these negative aspects of identity are addressed therapeutically and in an empowering way;
- Adults experiencing depression as one of the major hallmarks of a depressive condition is a negative self-identity.

# Emotion

Our life paths, according to Derek Layder (2007), are likely to be a mix of disappointment and anxiety on the one hand, and security and trust (to varying measures depending on life experience), on the other. Linked with this, we sometimes feel engulfed by others while, at other times, we may feel an absence of intimacy. Regardless of who we are and what experience we may have had, we are never completely free of anxiety or insecurity of some sort. Some people can deal with their inner insecurity much better than others but security and trust are never completely resolved inner states. Hence, trust and security might vary from situation to situation and might change according to the stage of the life cycle. Trust and security might also rely on individual coping capacities and resilience.

Building on these initial thoughts, emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2009) is a vital concept in the Domain of Psychobiography. It refers to a capacity for self-awareness – of both internal thoughts and also feeling-states and how they impact on one's behaviour. More than that, it is the ability to discern different emotions within others with whom one is interacting. Showing empathy for such emotions and directing one's response to the other on the basis of insights about them and self, is tantamount to building and sustaining all kinds of relationship (see the Domain of Relationship). Emotional intelligence also leads to social skills such as adept communication, turn-taking in conversations, and showing respectful attunement to another's needs. It focuses on how I am affecting you and how you are affecting me. Critically, it leads to the skill of emotional regulation within self. This refers to the capacity to identify different internal feeling states, talk about them with others and control their negative manifestations such as anger. Social work practitioners who are high in emotional intelligence, according to David Howe (2008), are more effective and compassionate in their engagements with service users.

An area associated with emotional intelligence and regulation, is that of emotional resilience. Resilience refers to the capacity to 'bounce back' from misfortune, to 'come through against the odds'. People who show an aptitude for mastering life events, maintaining optimism, managing their cognitive and emotional lives, forging and sustaining social relationships, developing positive, pro-social values, and having talents and interests, tend, on average, to have a greater capacity for resilience, compared to others lacking such qualities.

## Remember...

Emotion refers to the feelings we experience. Some emotions can be negative and affect the way we relate to ourselves and others. Developing emotional intelligence helps to regulate these emotions and build resilience.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Young people who have very turbulent emotions (which may lead to self-harm) such as anger, fear or sadness, particularly when they feel overwhelmed by the intensity of these emotions;
- People who are very vulnerable to environmental stress. In these cases, working with emotions can help to build their resilience;
- Younger children with attachment disorders who avoid the expression of emotion as a defence-mechanism (see also the Domain of Relationship).



# The Life Course

The life-course deeply affects one's psychobiography. It refers to a person's lifelong experience from birth, through maturation, to (finally) death and how she or he has adjusted, changed, developed and declined over time. The life-course, however, is not a linear process but one marked by twists and turns, unexpected events, periods of inertia, and moments of accelerated growth. There are many influences on this pathway: biological, psychological and social to name a few. We will concentrate here mainly on a psychological and sociological approach to the life-course. The latter approach takes on a particular purchase as it challenges the inevitability of the fixed 'ages and stages' model popularised in many psychological perspectives. In contrast, for many sociologists (eg Hunt, 2005) the life-course is socially constructed depending on cultural setting and period of time. For example, there is research evidence suggesting old age must not be boxed into predetermined categories. It can be experienced in a raft of different ways and is open to many expressions. Reminiscence is a powerful tool for exploring the changeable nature of this journey.

Major currents of cultural change in modern society ensure there are no fixed stages in human development. Other social factors - such as social differentiation, inequalities, ethnicity, race, religion, and social class - mould our reactions to life's transitions. While these insights are hugely important, it is equally important not to reduce every aspect of the life-course to social factors, (Sibeon, 2004). Psychology continues to provide robust insights concerning people's inner mental and emotional states.

That is why it is vital to combine psychology and sociology when it comes to this overall topic (Green, 2010).

An example of this stance (to some degree) is Erik Erikson's (1980) time-honoured and much popularised model of psychosocial development throughout the life-course (see Table 1 below). It continues to be referenced in current sources on human development and deserves mention because of its relevance.

**Table 1.**

## **Erikson's Model of Psychosocial Development**

1. Basic Trust vs. Mistrust (0 – 1 years of age)
2. Autonomy vs. Shame (1-2 years of age)
3. Initiative vs. Guilt (3 – 6 years of age)
4. Industry vs. Inferiority (7 – 11 years of age)
5. Identity vs. Role Confusion (12 – 20 years)
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation (21 – 24 years of age)
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (25 – 64 years of age)
8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair (65 years onward)

Erikson developed his theory by drawing on Freudian concepts of the personality and sociocultural ideas even though they reflected American norms and values. In the first stage – trust vs. mistrust – the young infant has the potential to gain (or not gain) basic security in others and the social world. In early childhood, by way of contrast, successful resolution of the second stage results in a deeper sense of self-confidence and control. When it comes to ‘initiative vs. guilt’, in the third stage, the positive outcome is one of creativity acting on the social world. This compares with the fourth stage (industry vs. inferiority) where school age children are presented with the challenge of developing confidence in their skills and efficacy or, alternatively, falling into shame. The struggle within adolescence (the fifth stage) revolves around the need to develop a coherent identity or else fall into confusion about who one might be in life. Young adulthood delves into the tension of whether we have the capacity to love others and engage in intimate relations with them. This is Erikson’s sixth stage. In the following one, he suggests adulthood pivots on an ability to demonstrate concern for others generationally speaking and, more widely, for society’s overall moral stance. In the final stage, the personality strives to develop wisdom, stave off despair and ‘piece it all together’ existentially. This is about creating and reflecting back on past meaning.

## Remember...

The life-course refers to our unique journey across consecutive ages and stages.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Any person who is making a significant transition in his or her life-cycle e.g. a child about to move into adolescence who is showing fear or apprehension about changing school and connecting with a new peer group;
- An older person moving into residential care who feels depressed about the loss of role and activity;
- A depressed person who shows a lack of initiative. This person needs to be empowered to move out of learned helplessness perhaps through the application of the task-centred approach.

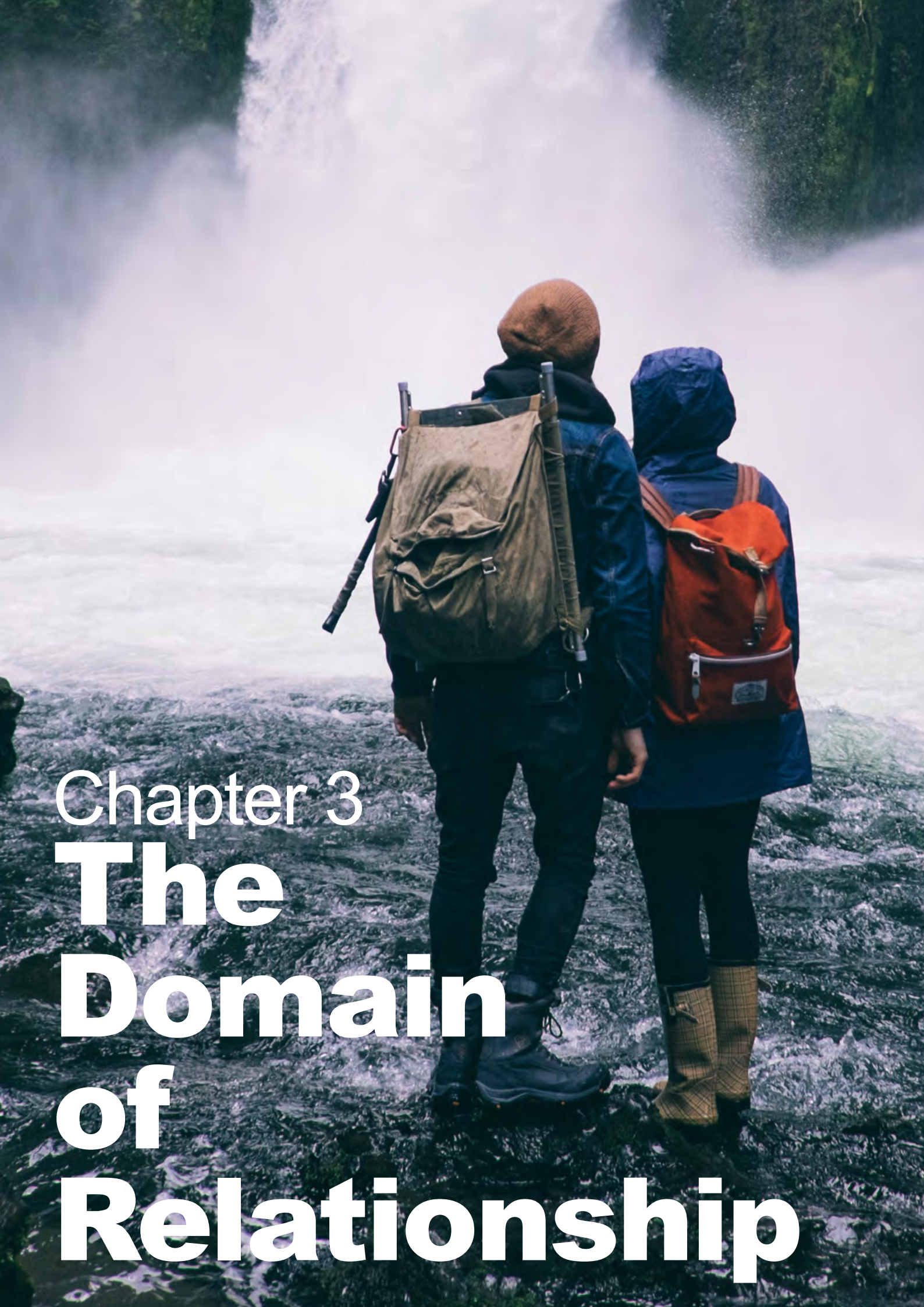
# Reflective Questions

Reflect on three service users with whom you have had some association.

- 1. How and in what way are they shaped by the domain of psychobiography?**
- 2. What sort of narratives do they tell?**
- 3. How do they relate to themselves? Is this internal relationship friendly, hostile, punitive, critical? What aspects of this domain might explain this reaction?**
- 4. With what stage of the life path are they engaging and how are psychological and sociological factors impacting on them?**
- 5. What types of emotion are present in their lives and what impact do they have on their identity and lived experience?**

Now reflect on the impact of this domain on your life.

- 1. How has it shaped your identity, life-course, emotional life and narrative?**
- 2. How has it influenced your approach to these service users and your perspective on social work, more generally?**
- 3. Consider how your gender, age, religion, culture, and social class affect the way you respond to service users with similar and different characteristics.**



Chapter 3

# The Domain of Relationship

# Areas Covered:

- **Human Attachment (throughout the life-course)**
- **Family Relationships**
- **Recognition Theory**

## Introduction

**The celebrated English literary novelist Ian McEwan, said on one occasion: ‘I’m convinced real happiness is other people’. This statement reflects the truism that we are social beings ‘all the way through’. Our identity is a social construct in the sense we react to how others react to us. When we first come into the world we are deeply connected (with our caregivers) before we develop a sense of our individuality. As this connection recedes, relationship continues to provide meaning, social support, comfort and a sense of belonging. Conversely, relationships can break down into estrangement through negative projections, misunderstandings and unmet care and control needs. Yet, regardless of these potential outcomes, people need to be seen in the context of their most intimate, close relationships (for example, peers, family, and friends) and also the human bonds formed through wider social networks (for instance, relationships developed in the workplace). This truth connects with an ecological or systems approach to social work practice. In this section, we will examine three aspects of the domain of relationship which have most relevance for social work practice, namely: human attachment, family relationships, and recognition theory.**

# Human Attachment

Most of the early work and research on human attachment has focused on the connection between caregivers and young children (Bowlby, 2005). Here, it is posited that children require a secure base with their carers to enable them to explore their social worlds and therefore develop cognitive, emotional, social and linguistic skills – in other words, to mature into confident, responsible adults who are fully open to the challenges they may face in various settings. The corollary to this is children who experience impoverished care of some sort and the insecurity it engenders. As a consequence, exploratory actions might be compromised and human development thwarted. Furthermore, it is suggested secure children can develop positive inner working models whereas insecure children are at risk of having the opposite experience.

The concept of the inner working model refers to the image the child has of herself, others and the world at large and has primary organising functions in a person's daily thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, it leads to a range of outcomes later on including different types of psychological adjustment and social connectedness. Insecure children, from the evidence, tend to resort to various defence mechanisms such as splitting and denial to protect this sensitive, interior, psychological construct. Secure children, alternatively, do not need to invest their psychic energies in these protective endeavours and are, consequently, more open to developing their personalities with others.

It is important to reiterate at this point that attachment extends well beyond the sphere of childhood and adolescence into the remaining stages of the adult life-course (Howe, 2011). In this regard, there has been increasing interest in adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). It is contended in this body of work that romantic relationships between adults can mirror much earlier interactions experienced with their caregivers. Based on this insight, it is possible to draw the conclusion that adult romantic relationships are forms of attachment where issues of feeling safe or unsafe are paramount.

Attachment theory, to conclude this section, offers a vital perspective in the theory of psychosocial domains. It does so by offering a deep, explanatory account of human behaviour that is most relevant to the settings in which social workers operate. It enables the enquirer to understand and predict what sort of behaviours and emotional reactions might happen in the future. More than this, it pinpoints the areas in people's lives and relationships that need therapeutic attention and restorative healing.

The centre point in all of this is the imperative to develop secure inner working models within children and adults.

Attachment theory suggests this can only come about through 'relationship-based' forms of helping. Consistently warm attachments containing responses from significant others provide security and offer a platform for children and adults to regulate strong, negative emotions, develop social competences and resilience.

## Remember...

Attachment signifies the strong need within us to closely bond with significant others throughout the life-course.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Children and adults who have had a poor experience of attachment with parents, caregivers or significant others, where their inner working models have been affected in a negative way. The therapeutic aim, here, is to help such persons gain insight into the impact of these past relationships and to experience, if possible, secure attachments.
- Young people who present with very troubled and troublesome behaviour – eg. in residential care or secure accommodation. In this context, attachment theory enables the social worker to think about what is causing the behaviour rather than just responding to it. It allows social workers to 'dig' beneath the surface.
- People who have suffered loss and are undergoing a grief reaction. The theory sharpens social work empathy giving insights into the human need for relationship.

# Family Relationships

It is important to note, at the outset, that the so-called typical nuclear family is in much decline. The rise in divorce, family dissolution and reconstitution, the notable prevalence of single parent families, cohabitation and gay families – all endorse this point. Nevertheless, regardless of these transformations, there are five key structural areas of family life that take on a particular purchase for social workers, namely: (a) communication (b) roles (c) problem-solving and decision-making (d) emotional engagement and (e) control. To take the first of these, communication can be both verbal and non-verbal and the congruence between the two is of major importance. What I say, and how I look when I say it, must match, in order to avoid the transmission of mixed or ulterior messages. In addition, the communication of practical and emotional needs must both take place. Strong emotions, such as anger, need to be relayed in a manner that does not break social bonds. Conflict must be handled constructively. Family members also need positive communication that shows reinforcement and the expression of warmth. Low warmth, high criticism communication patterns are invariably toxic and constitute a form of emotional abuse. As a corollary, communication over the family's practical needs ought to occur in a way that is clear, comprehensible and comprehensive to avoid problems in areas such as the payment of bills and the repair of household items.

Building on sound communication, families need to operationalise various kinds of roles. There are two main types: emotional and practical. Emotional roles fulfil needs for comfort, reassurance and human affection. Yet who provides these roles and to whom? Practical roles relate to areas such as shopping, cooking, home repairs, planning, organising and maintaining the day-to-day efficient running of home life. This involves adherence to routines and ensuring important stages of each day are managed effectively; for example, rising and leaving for school and work. In all of this, roles work best when they are agreed, when there is an equitable division of labour, where reciprocity takes place and when there is a sense of complementarity in the range of tasks performed.

Problem-solving and decision-making are required by families to help them adapt and respond to the inevitable challenges coming their way.

Both necessitate some capacity to analyse the issue, break it down into its component parts, enumerate the range of possible solutions, evaluate each, make a choice as to the most desired one, and finally implement it. This requires a certain level of cognitive competence and reflective capacity. To miss out on one of these stages of problem analysis, is to heighten the risk of poor outcomes. Problem-solving, whatever the context, is mostly a systematic, logical process involving some level of reasoned prediction. Again, it relates to both emotional and practical aspects of family functioning.

The fourth structural area refers to the level and type of emotional engagement within the family. Some families are quite estranged in terms of how they express feelings. Others are effusive, sentimental and gushing.

In some families, the emotional distance between members is so great that there is little by way of emotional support. By way of contrast, in other families, members are overly embroiled or enmeshed in each other's lives – in a way that is emotionally suffocating. Support is a vital attribute of family life but it must be constructed in a way that respects that fine balance between needs for intimacy, on the one hand, and needs for distance, on the other. Negotiating the balance between emotional separateness and relatedness presents a primary challenge for all families. In this setting, the desire for greater freedom collides with the need for continuing security.

The last area is that of control. That is, behaviour within families needs to be controlled particularly in the context of parent-child relationships. A range of parental control strategies over children and adolescents are evident here: assertive, authoritarian, democratic and neglecting. Research has shown that parenting that demonstrates appropriate demands of children and yet, at the same time, is warm, is the most effective in terms of child socialisation and optimal child development outcomes.

When considering the aforementioned structural aspects of family relationship, gender becomes a central theme. Even though the family is a place where solace and support are provided, it is also a sphere of domestic exploitation. Power, according to feminist perspectives, is often unevenly divided between men and women. Roles can be far from symmetrically allocated in the domestic division of labour. Furthermore, women's domestic labour in the home is sometimes neither recognised nor rewarded financially.

The concern here is that the burden of practical caring, but also emotional labour within the family context, disproportionately falls to women. In this regard, Anthony Giddens (2006) makes a plea for the democratisation of family relationships between men and women and between adults and children. The hallmark of this plea is the sharing of power entailing the use of negotiation rather than force.

## Remember...

The family is a primary site within the domain of 'relationship'. It is here people seek security, love and support even though pursuing this dream can turn into a nightmare of unfulfilled expectation and projection.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Families where there is conflict (e.g. in cases of domestic violence). Different aspects of the conflict can be related to the nature of communication, role allocation, problem-solving and control functions in the family and how they are expressed. The role of mediation is central here.
- Parents, when a parenting capacity assessment in child protection is required. The ideas mentioned in this section enable social workers to ask specific questions about parenting roles and tasks in order to determine if 'good enough' care of children is being provided.



# Recognition Theory

According to the eminent social theorist, Axel Honneth (2012), people require three kinds of recognition within human relationships in order to form and sustain a healthy identity. These are recognition through: (a) acts of love (b) the acknowledgement of human rights and (c) identifying a person's strengths and contribution to a social network or community. Acts of love, first of all, are integral to the human attachment system starting at birth and continuing throughout child and adult maturation. Through such displays of affection, people develop self-esteem. The opposite is abuse, denigration, acts of emotional and physical violence leading to fractured self-worth. Secondly, for a flourishing identity to materialise, the person must be shown respect. Respect means her rights to be a full and active citizen must be upheld publicly and interpersonally. The outcome of this form of recognition is self-respect. However, when respect and rights are withheld through misogyny, racism, xenophobia, sectarianism (and other forms of oppression), the development of self-respect is compromised. Lastly, in order for self-confidence to flourish, a person's strengths and contribution to others must be recognised. This requirement resonates with strengths-based social work where the focus moves away from a negative, deficit-oriented form of practice to one that seeks out positives, no matter how small or hidden. Lack of confidence and feeling powerless follow from acts of misrecognition in this vital area.

## Remember...

Recognition is the primary response required for optimal identity-formation. Misrecognition is the response which jeopardises identity-formation.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Service users who have been socially excluded or oppressed. The aim, here, is to enable them to experience, in some form, aspects of the three types of recognition. This approach fits well with strengths-based social work and anti-oppressive social work;
- Service users who experience a problematic sense of identity, who lack esteem, self-confidence and self-respect. These three areas can be targeted by acts of recognition in the three areas stipulated above. Recognition-based social work is particularly relevant when working with service users in any form of institutional care or containment including offenders, older people, people in hospital care or in therapeutic residential care.

# Reflective Questions

Reflect on three service users with whom you have had some association in the past.

- 1. How have their lives been shaped by the domain of relationship?**
- 2. What has their attachment experience been like and how has this shaped their inner working models?**
- 3. Has poor attachment experience led to any form of defended behaviour?**
- 4. Do they carry any stigma and have they been subject to any form of labelling practice? If so, what has this meant for their overall emotional well-being?**
- 5. What has their experience of family life been like? To what extent is their family experience hampered by poor communication, problem-solving, emotional engagement, control and role definition?**
- 6. Have they experienced recognition through love, respect and the identification of their strengths or has their experience been largely tainted through acts of misrecognition? If the latter is the case, how has this impacted on their self-identity?**

Now, as a social worker or enabler of social work practice, reflect on how this domain, in its varying facets, has impacted on you and your view of self and the social world.

Chapter 4  
**The  
Domain  
of  
Culture**



## **Areas Covered:**

- **Core Ideas Underpinning Culture**
- **Difference and Inequality**

## **Introduction**

**The domain of culture examines how social meanings are captured within communities and wider society. It will be examined by defining the core ideas underpinning culture, setting out the main sociological approaches to the area. This section will conclude examining the darker side of culture: difference, division and inequality.**

# Core Ideas

At the outset, the notion of culture gives human life its ultimate meaning. It is how we approach social life in the most fundamental, taken-for-granted way. Given its pervasive effects, culture is socially reproduced by social actors from one generation to the next although change is possible as we shall examine below. It can be broken down into two core elements, the 'material' and the 'symbolic'. With regard to the former, there is a range of artefacts which give our life meaning. Artefacts are physical, person-made objects which have significance for social actors. We can think here of totem poles, religious relics and rites, sculptures and also modern-day, consumer products. More practically, material culture includes technical, manufacturing objects as well as a range of different types of building and engineered infrastructure.

Symbolic culture, on the other hand, refers more to the concepts framing social life: the range of ideas, religious beliefs, norms, and values that shape how we interact with others in the domain of relationship (see the previous section). Of major importance, here, is the use of signs, gestures and language to convey meaning according to various types of cultural context. Signs might be compared to symbols which have a significance. For instance, social location is represented through various types of signs on the roads and streets of urban areas. Gestures, alternatively, are the signs we make with our bodies: hand gestures being one example.

Culture also comprises a strong moral dimension. In this connection, societal values refer to the shared beliefs that give moral substance to community life, that provide a set of desired ways of being with each other. In turn, values generate norms. They represent the rules guiding behaviour. Some of these norms are formal and encoded in law; others are more colloquially applied in every day encounters where respect becomes a much required principle of interaction. They also apply to behavioural codes in institutions such as schools and factories or may be seen in adherence to the rules of the sporting game. It follows that some norms are more strictly applied and backed up by a legal sanction. In contrast, other norms are subconscious ways of being as witnessed in daily customs and rituals. Importantly, the sociologist Irving Goffman (1990) indicated social interaction was a moral order – one guided by agreed rules of engagement. Even getting into a lift with others requires adherence to certain behavioural protocols such as avoiding eye contact.

## Remember...

Culture refers to the material and symbolic aspects of social life and includes the values, norms and mores defining who we are and what we should be.



## Connections

Social workers can make use of this section when working with:

- Minority groups, migrants and asylum seekers who require support or where some kind of risk or vulnerability is evident. Social workers must attempt to practise culturally sensitive social work and tune-in to the customs, language and meaningful symbols of the group in order to empower them;
- Situations where decisions have to be made about what is acceptable care. For example, a family from a different country might well have alternative views about parenting children compared with our own. In such cases, the question of 'bottom line' standards needs to be determined – yet done so sensitively; and
- Disadvantaged groups in order to respect and strengthen their self-identity. It is vital to recognise, here, that we derive our self-concept from our culture. We can connect this with professional interventions which attempt to enhance the self-esteem of ethnic minority children, children of diverse and radically different cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds.

# Difference and Inequality

Many cultures throughout the world propagate types of inequality. Therborn (2013) indicated there were three: (a) inequalities of health, life and death. These are linked to the biological organism through birth and death rates, transition through the life-cycle (see the Domain of Psychobiography), illness, disability and disease. Ageism, patriarchy and disablism, classically, are social reactions supporting this type of inequality (b) existential inequalities. Here, the focus is on responses to individuals exhibiting some form of difference. Stigma results when difference is denigrated and positive esteem not accorded as, for example, with different types of sexual identity (c) resource inequalities refer to the differences between people in terms of the capital they possess. Capital, in this context, can be interpreted to mean economic capital (e.g. money), status capital (e.g. rank), educational capital (e.g. recognised qualifications).

People are divided according to a differential allocation of types of capital: monetary, status, education, and knowledge. Life opportunities are therefore determined by the amount of social capital open to the person. It is essential to add that these types of inequality are intersecting. Hence, class affiliation, the gender order (and patriarchy), racial formation, ethnic identification, age stratification, the sexual identity orders, disability and health orders – are all commingling forms of experience exacerbating people's life opportunities and overall sense of well-being. Within this magnified potentiality of inequality, Iris Marian Young (1990) has identified a number of constant, oppressive processes including:

- **Social exclusion and marginalisation whereby a whole category of people are expelled from meaningful participation in social life;**
- **Exploitation whereby the results of the labour of one social group are transferred unfairly to benefit others;**
- **Powerlessness whereby people come to lack authority, status and the recognition they deserve;**
- **Cultural imperialism whereby a dominant group enforces its view of culture upon others; and**
- **Violence whereby the illicit use of force is applied by one group to another group to meet their vested interests.**

These processes are seen in the practices of homophobia and heteronormativity (impacting on the sexual order), ideologies of sickness and disablism, ageist viewpoints, the application of patriarchal ideas to women, and in racial and cultural stereotypes.

## Remember...

Difference and inequality affect life outcomes in a dramatic manner. Oppressive reactions to difference can be expressed in a range of ways and involve exclusion, the misuse of power, or asserting dominant cultural norms over minority ethnic groups.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Service users experiencing poverty. Tuning-in to the impact of income hardship can lead to more accurate empathy but also a resolve to use advocacy and mediation approaches with a range of government, voluntary and community agencies;
- Families facing some kind of oppression. This may require challenging unjust power or empowering service users to gain more social capital. It may involve opening spaces for alternative understandings in mental health practice, addressing violence and abuse in a gendered world, tackling disabling discourses, or dealing with social isolation in rural areas;
- Minority ethnic families in order to promote culturally sensitive social work practice;
- Families who are disaffected and excluded and who need to be engaged within meaningful partnership and participation in decisions affecting their lives;
- Episodes of sectarianism whether they occur at an organisational or interpersonal level.

# Reflective Questions

Reflect on three service users with whom you have had some association in the past.

- 1. How has the domain of culture shaped their lives, meanings, goals and aspirations?**
- 2. To what extent are they supported by communities around them?**
- 3. To what extent does the prevailing culture discriminate against them?**

Now think of your own experience.

- 1. How has the domain of culture shaped your goals, aspirations and activity?**
- 2. Do you think cultural ideology reinforces social division and difference or is it more of a harmonising force?**
- 3. Have you ever experienced or challenged sectarianism?**



Chapter 5

# **The Domain of Organisation**



## **Areas Covered:**

- **Bureaucracy and Management**

### **Introduction**

**Most of us are affected in some way by formal organisations. These include the workplace, various bureaucracies with which we come into contact (such as government bodies), schools we have attended, universities we may have graduated from and possibly care institutions in which our elderly relatives may now reside. As social workers, we may visit children who live in children's homes or who may have required the stability provided by secure accommodation. Other social workers may have been involved in the compulsory detention of adults in a mental health facility. Regardless of these variations in setting, organisations may share a number of common characteristics which we will explore in this section.**

# Bureaucracy and Management

Max Weber suggested bureaucracy was very common in modern organisations. It led to forms of specialisation, hierarchy, technical competence, impersonality and formal written communication. However, he was downbeat about bureaucracy because he saw it as a form of individual and social entrapment – a so-called ‘iron cage’ of disenchantment, preventing autonomous initiative, discretion and flexible action. However, this view obscures the positive side of bureaucracy: having rules and formal procedures can prevent poor practice and chaos by providing direction in periods of uncertainty. Moreover, it provides a model of productivity and efficiency - if gauged right. Nonetheless, overzealous bureaucracy can alienate and dehumanise, as Weber said. It can also lead to inefficiency through adherence to obsolete rituals.

In a related vein, Robert Merton coined the term ‘bureaucratic ritualism’ to describe a process where bureaucracy becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Following rules blindly is not necessarily person-centred. To humanise bureaucracy, as an antidote to such trends, means to make it more democratic and implemented with a human face. Moreover, person-centred organisations embrace social inclusiveness in all its guises. They share responsibilities and expand opportunities for person-centred advancement.

The contemporary audit culture is one that embraces bureaucracy for good reasons. It stems primarily from a movement known as Total Quality Management. One of its central themes is quality assurance: a full scale review of the work process whereby aims and objectives need to be clearly defined and targets enumerated. The attainment of targets is then appraised through a traffic light system of ‘green’ signifying the target was achieved, ‘red’ for unachieved and ‘amber’ representing partial achievement. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats give shape to the organisation’s strategic direction as does the popularised ‘stakeholder analysis’.

Customer engagement and feedback is integral to the process of managing the organisation. Quality assurance additionally leads to outside inspection and regulation. In this connection, highly trained inspectors take account of quality processes, or the lack of them. Terms such as benchmarking and accreditation proliferate the quality enhancement discourse. The onus is on safe practice but also practice that is effective and efficient. These changes often take place in notable shifts from the modern to the postmodern organisation. If the former is typified by hierarchy, specialised functions and an inclination towards rigidity, the latter moves in the direction of being more organic, networked, unspecialised and flexible.

In summary, the rise of managerialism in social work has sometimes led to: (a) downsizing – or shrinking the organisation through redundancy or forced retirement

(b) re-engineering – that is, re-evaluating the purpose and goals of the organisation in line with new goals so that the organisation is more responsive to the needs of its stakeholders (c) continuous improvement – by continually engaging in small scale change and improvements to quality and (d) limiting professional autonomy – through regulating professional activity.

## Remember...

Bureaucracy is a method chiefly used by modern organisations to organise their productivity and service response. It relies on rational procedures and hierarchical systems.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

Colleagues, managers, staff within their own and other’s agencies, and service users. This can be done by applying this knowledge to oneself, in what ways does bureaucracy help or hinder your role? How can you use recording to strengthen your professional practice and ensure it is safe? To what extent can you achieve a balance between administration and face-to-face service user contact? To what extent is discretion a part of your decision-making practice when using bureaucracy? How do organisations working in the community, voluntary, statutory and private sectors differ in role, structure, type and function and does this create differing expectations? How can standards of practice be linked to demonstrating effective and quality social service delivery in organisations? What are the factors that contribute to stress in the organisation and how might this be overcome? What factors can improve the workplace and morale within your organisation? How does organisational change impact on your role and function?

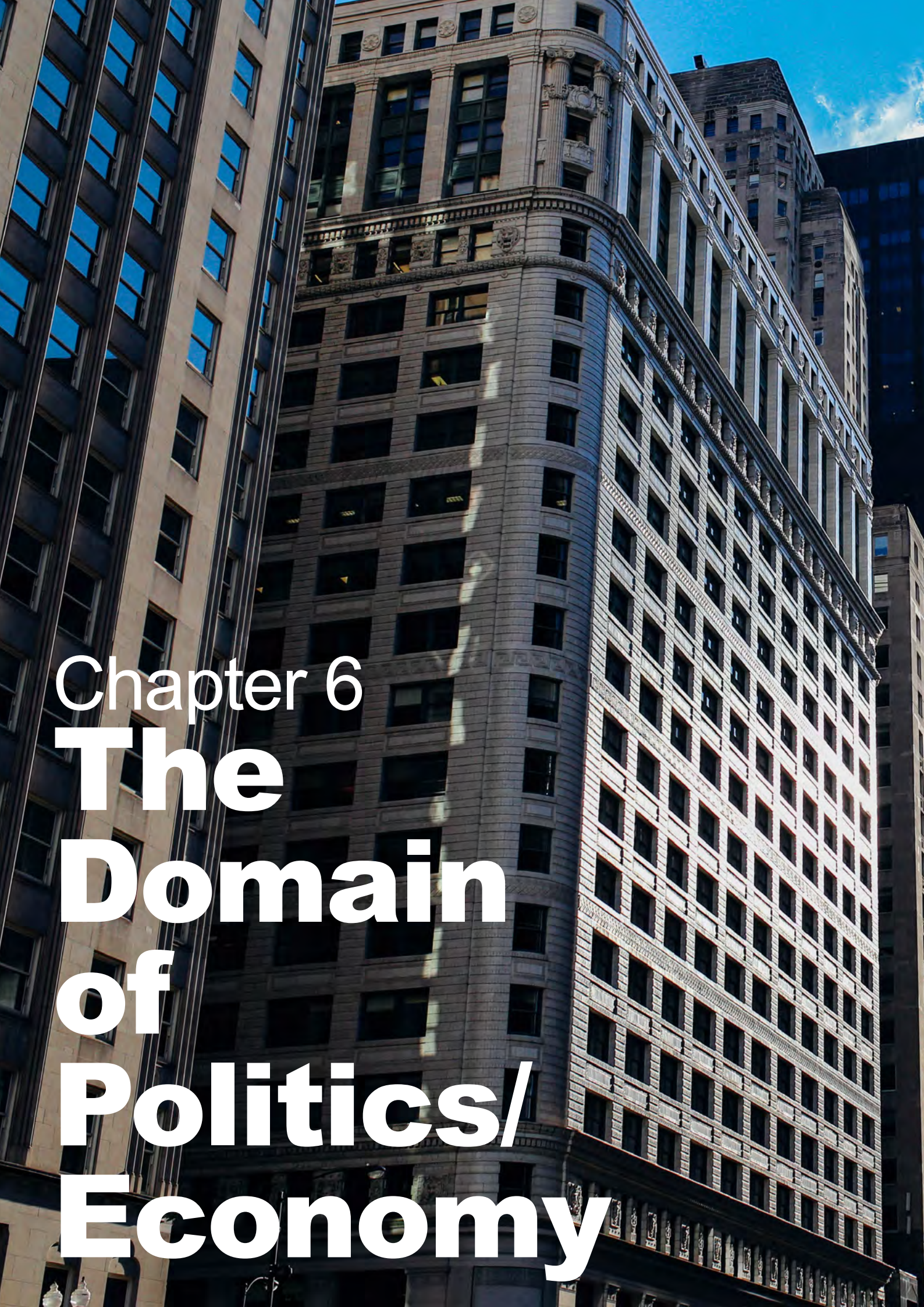
# Reflective Questions

Reflect on three service users with whom you have had some association.

- 1. How and in what way are they shaped by the domain of organisation?**
- 2. How have they reacted to bureaucracy?**
- 3. How have organisations helped or hindered their well-being?**

Now reflect on yourself in terms of the impact of this domain on your life.

- 1. How has it shaped your professional practice?**
- 2. What are the benefits and drawbacks of instrumental rationality in welfare organisations?**



Chapter 6

**The  
Domain  
of  
Politics/  
Economy**

## **Areas Covered:**

- **Neo-liberalism and Globalisation**

### **Introduction**

**This area refers to the macro domain of social life. Specifically, it centres on the spheres of politics and economics, how they impact on people's lives and, in particular, the formation of social policy by governments. In this context, I will address the nature of the current political and economic order and its attempts to curb the world economic recession. This section will cover the growing inequalities throughout many societies.**

# Neo-liberalism

**Neo-liberalism is the contemporary expression of capitalism which has been adopted in most western States to varying degrees. It started off in the 1980s when popularised by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. It can be summarised under three headings: (a) core ideas (b) governance and (c) policy.**

In terms of neo-liberalism's core ideas, its chief supporters maintain that the consumerist freemarket (which should be free of State interference and regulation) leads to sound economic performance, market stability, and overall gains in wealth over time. As wealth increases in society, it is contended, it will be shared with its poorer members. This is referred to as the 'trickle down effect' of wealth creation.

Another feature of neo-liberalism is that trade is allowed to flow across national boundaries without the limiting effects of restrictive tariffs. Global competition ensures quality for consumers at the best price. Everyone, it is claimed, can achieve success with enough industry and drive. Company shareholders ensure that profitability is placed top of the agenda. Individualism in public and private life (see the Domain of Culture) is endorsed by encouraging people to maximise their wealth. In all of this, the money supply has to be tightly controlled, deficits reduced, and public spending curtailed in order to institute tax breaks for the rich. Union action is challenged and seen as working against economic efficiency.

Neo-liberal governance, the second dimension, is rooted in core values such as competitiveness, self-interest and decentralisation. Embracing these values, neo-liberals pursue the public good through strategic plans; risk management; efficiency audits; value-for-money reviews; the setting of inputs, outputs and outcomes; target-led performance management; and the adoption of business plans. In all of this, being entrepreneurial and self-interested is encouraged. Many of these changes are rooted in the new public management – a system which advocates viewing recipients of services as customers.

Lastly, neo-liberalism is fundamentally expressed through a particular set of public policies including what has been referred to as the 'D-L-P formula'. 'D' stands for deregulation of the economy. 'L' stands for the liberalisation of trade. 'P' stands for privatisation of state-owned welfare and enterprise. In this formula, welfare is seen to be an overly exuberant drain on the economy, one that needs to be radically pruned back and replaced in some contexts with the notion of workfare. Government, generally, is seen as a resource-intensive structure in need of downsizing. Furthermore, family values are exhorted through family-friendly policies (see Domain of Relationship).

Within these three dimensions of globalised neo-liberalism, two central problems arise: commodification and growing inequalities. Commodification refers to the way in which various aspects of life are turned into commodities or things for sale. Market values replace social values. People are no longer subjects but rather units of production whose labour is bought and sold without sentiment. In short, people become de-personalised objects. More than that, important areas of life, such as education, become a product to be sold as opposed to a way of developing people. The prevalence of advertisements shows that social life has become a process of buying and selling where consumerism is the norm. Commodification also ensures that people in receipt of welfare services are sucked into market forces: means-tested benefits and targeted provision being two examples. The opposite of commodification is de-commodification. Here, people's welfare rights are not linked to the market but rather their citizenship entitlements. Universal benefits for all within a society are one important expression of a de-commodified welfare regime.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have addressed the second area, that of global inequalities, in great depth. They convincingly show that inequalities are growing in neo-liberal societies at an alarming rate. Not only that, they argue, through supportive research findings, how inequality leads to life-diminishing effects on a range of key measures. Thus, such societies experience higher rates of teenage pregnancy, crime and violence, obesity, educational non-achievement and mental ill-health. A key finding is that all classes in neo-liberal societies are adversely affected by the disparities in wealth, not just the downtrodden underclasses. More affluent members of these societies suffer as well due to factors such as higher rates of crime and poorer environments. Notably, Wilkinson and Pickett showed how countries (e.g. Sweden and Norway), with less income disparity, had better social outcomes on a range of measures.

## Remember...

Neo-liberalism refers to a global economic model privileging the role of the free market and individualism but also leading to widespread inequality and commodification.



## Connections

**Social workers can make use of this section when working with:**

- Service users who are experiencing poverty, inequality and class discrimination. What is your response to service users facing these issues? To what extent do you engage in welfare rights as a central part of your role? To what extent do you engage in advocacy, mediation and negotiation on behalf of such service users? Do you ever highlight unmet need to your line-managers? To what extent do you factor in material inequality to your assessments, viewing it as a key cause of social problems such as poor mental health and child development? How far is social work a class-based activity? What is the impact of cuts in services on you and the service users with whom you work?
- Vulnerable older people given the move to self-directed care and the danger of financial exploitation in a climate of cuts to resources and services.

# Reflective Questions

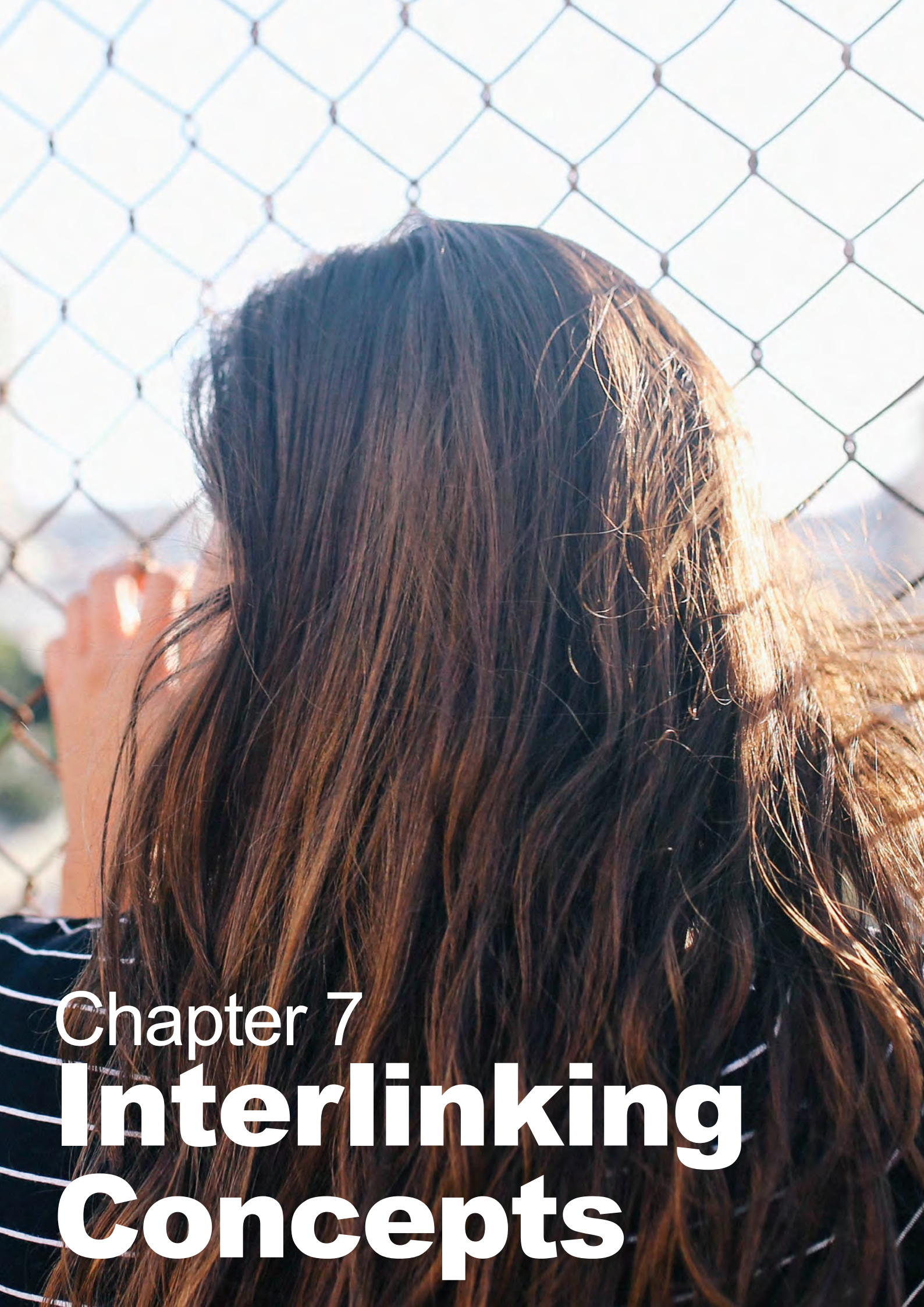
Reflect on three service users with whom you have had some association.

- 1. How has the domain of politics/economy either directly or indirectly shaped their lives?**
- 2. How has the prevailing welfare regime impacted on the delivery of services to them?**
- 3. What impact has inequality had on their life-opportunities and well-being?**

Now consider how the domain of politics/economy has impacted on your own life either directly or indirectly.

- 1. To what extent is globalisation affecting the role and tasks of social workers in your area?**





Chapter 7

# **Interlinking Concepts**

# Areas Covered:

- **Power**
- **Agency and Structure**

## Power

Embracing Michel Foucault's (1995) ideas, power is everywhere and anywhere. In his formulation, power casts its net widely. It operates at the macro sphere of the State and also the micro world of social interaction and relationship. Hence, it is common throughout each of the domains of psychobiography, relationship, culture, organisation and politics/economy. Although power can be possessed by a social group in order to utilise control over others, it is also a force for positive enablement, for creating purposeful change. Thus, it is a force for negative oppression but also a force for human betterment and, moreover, a neutral resource in some situations. In many cases it is not simply configured for enabling or constraining action; its effects may be more diffuse and subtle.

For Foucault, power in the modern age is used to discipline the human body through professional discourses telling us how we ought to present and behave. Discourses are forms of knowledge which allow certain ideas to be thought and communicated whilst suppressing others. Power is immersed in discourse. However, Foucault's notion needs to be expanded: discourse is not the only mechanism through which power operates. Individual subjects use power to achieve their predetermined ends. In other words, power is a feature of human action and intention. It is also located structurally in the way certain groups oppress other less powerful groups. Finally, we can see power operating in the psychological make-up of individuals; that is, through people's temperaments. Authoritarian personalities are a typical example of how this form of power is exercised.

### Remember...

Power is a multi-faceted resource that can enable and constrain human action. It circulates throughout every domain of experience.



**Social workers can make use of this section in the following ways:**

- Consider how power is exercised in the various organisations with which social workers have contact. Think about children's homes, hospitals, schools, nursing homes: how is power demonstrated, who holds the power, in what ways are service users empowered? How much choice do service users have in these organisations?
- Think about how power is expressed in the various families with which you have contact?
- Think about the organisation in which you work. How is power shown, positively or negatively?

# Agency and Structure

**Agency, in sociology, refers to the person's creative, intentional action that has the potential to effect change in social life or circumstances. It is embedded in the domain of psychobiography. Structure, by way of contrast, refers to reproduced social rules, norms, and expected ways of behaving that flow from the domain of culture, organisation and politics/economy. Structure can constrain or limit behaviour but also enable various practices to occur. In sociology, there has been a continuing debate centring on the interface between agency and structure and sociologists have adopted different formulations on the matter.**

The key questions are: How much agency do we possess? Is structure mainly constraining or does it also empower? Do certain groups have more agency than others? Does structure inhibit some groups more than others? By saying we have agency, do we then begin to blame others for failing to improve their lives? Some theories suggest we use our agency mainly in a rational way to get what we want while others see agency being used reflexively to shape our identities and lifestyle choices. Radical theorists see agency as a way of challenging oppressive social structure. Where do you stand?

## Remember...

The agency and structure debate revolves around the question as to how much freedom we possess to effect change in our lives versus how much we are determined by outside forces.



**Social workers can make use of this section in the following ways:**

- Consider how much agency you have in your job to effect change in your organisation. Or, is your role more determined by your organisation's structure: its rules and requirements?
- Consider how much agency you have to effect change in the lives of service users. Or, is change hampered by the fact that service users' lives are primarily determined by wider social forces?

# Summary Overview of the Psychosocial Domains

The domains - and their component parts - are presented below.

Table 2.  
**Overview of the Domains**

Domain of Psycho biography	Domain of Relationship	Domain of Culture	Domain of Organisation	Domain of Politics/ Economy
Narrative Identity Emotion Life-course	Attachment Family Recognition	Core ideas Difference Inequality	Bureaucracy Management	Neo-liberalism Globalisation

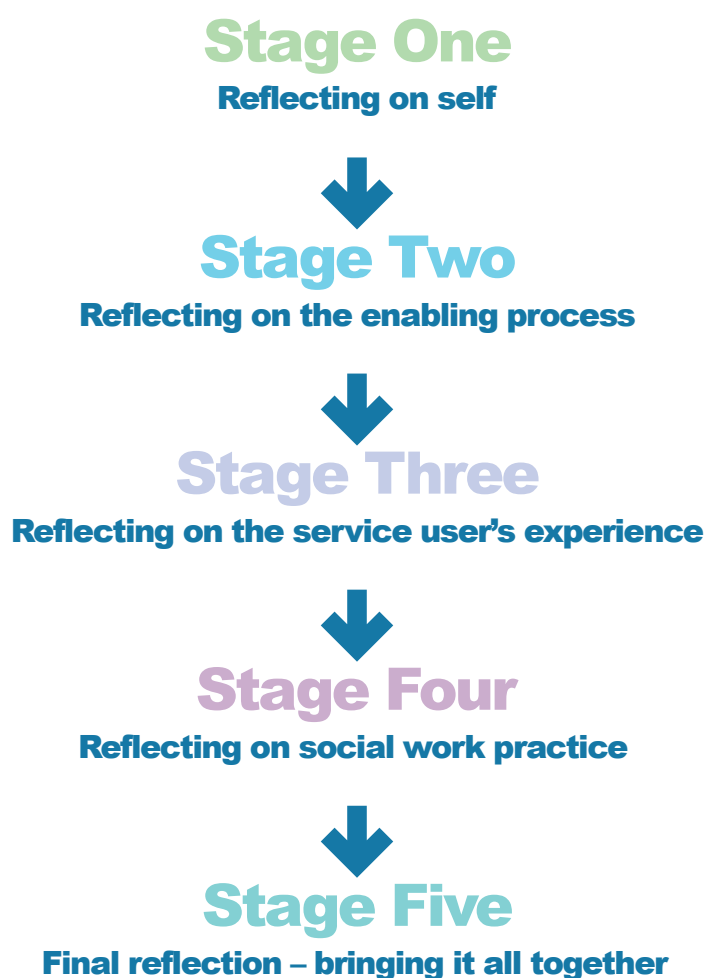
Combined, these domains explain human meaning and experience. They suggest a person is not just an individual psychological being. More than that, he or she is thrust into the world of the 'social'. In this context, identity is a social process deeply influenced by significant others. These tenets lead to the importance, or rather vital necessity, of 'relationship-based' social work. What service users require is a professional response using skills of empathy, non-judgementalism and recognition of strengths. Listening, valuing, supporting, being person-centred, placing people before process, are all facets of helping which lead to well-being. All of this suggests 'relationship-based' social work should be the 'prime directive'. Furthermore, it suggests we need to restore the 'social' in social work: to locate people in the context of their social networks first and foremost.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a piece of white chalk, writing on a green chalkboard. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, with the index and middle fingers gripping the chalk. The chalkboard is filled with faint, white, handwritten text and diagrams, including the word "Row" and some illegible scribbles. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the hand and the chalk.

Chapter 8  
**Enabling  
Others  
through  
Reflecting  
on the  
Domains**

**In this model there are five dimensions of reflection (see Figure 2 below). Each makes use of the domains outlined earlier. The five dimensions build up, cumulatively to deepen the social worker's and enabler's understanding of themselves, their role, and the needs of the service user. As such they can be applied sequentially – sometimes alone, sometimes in tandem with the enabler. For definitional purposes, the enabler can be a supervisor, team leader, line manager, practice teacher, mentor or trainer.**

**Figure 2 - Model of Enabling Process**



## Stage One

### **Social worker and enabler apply the model to their own life experience**

In this initial stage, both the social worker and enabler (that is, the practice teacher, team leader, mentor, line manager, trainer, practice assessor or tutor) consider separately how each of the domains have impacted on their lives, outlooks, beliefs, purposes and ambitions – and crucially, their view on social work as a helping process. The questions listed at the end of each section covering the domains should be considered here to flesh out this inquiry. In this undertaking both the social worker and enabler will consider their unique psychobiographies, the narratives shaping their stories, their progression through the life-course and so on. The role of emotion in shaping personal experience, as an offshoot of attachments to significant others, might be reflected on. More than that, the social worker and enabler should consider how organisations, culture and the political economy have shaped their perspectives and outlook. This is a vital undertaking in that, unless a social worker and enabler are conscious of how social life has shaped them, they could fall into mindless, oppressive, unsafe practice.

## Stage Two

### **Social worker and enabler consider how the domains shape their interaction in supervision, mentoring or coaching**

In this second stage, the social worker and enabler jointly explore how their differing experience of the domains shapes their interaction in supervision and how this impacts on the enabling process. The social worker and enabler may well have a very different psychobiography or experience of organisations. How does this affect the way they interact in supervision, what issues may it create, what potential misunderstandings may it evoke? How do differences in life-course impact on the social worker's professional development needs? How do the domains shape the way the enabler supervises, mentors or tutors? Importantly, though, disclosure of personal information should be appropriate, selective and relevant. There is no compunction to share private thoughts, feelings and experiences unless the person is comfortable in this undertaking.

## Stage Three

### **Social worker and enabler apply the model to 'tune-in' to the service user's experience and plan the social work process**

Building on the preceding stages, the social worker and enabler jointly attempt (through supervision, consultation etc.) to understand how the domains have shaped a service user's life, meanings, perspectives, needs, experience and the risks they face or present. This is a process of tuning-in to the service user's life in order to deepen accurate empathy, compassion and sensitivity but also to gain greater insight into how assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation should be structured. Obviously, it is important to apply this stage to more than one service user, preferably those from different backgrounds and with different needs.

## Stage Four

### **Social worker and enabler apply the model to reflect on the social worker's interaction with the service user**

In this stage, the social worker examines, with the enabler in supervision, how the domains affect his/her interaction with the service user. A critical issue here is how the social worker's gender, age, cultural background, race, religion and social class interface with the service user's different (or perhaps similar to some degree) profile in relation to these categories. Reflective insights gained from stages one, two and three will need to be harnessed here to make sense of the interactional dynamics between the social worker and service user. It is also important to appraise how this interaction affects the implementation of the social work process: assessment, goal-setting, intervention and evaluation.

## Stage Five

### **Towards final reflection**

This is the final, cumulative stage of reflection. Here, the insights gleaned from the preceding stages are brought together, examined, processed and synthesised – by the social worker and enabler jointly in supervision. The preceding stages have looked at how the domains influence the personal and professional self, enabling and being enabled, the service user's meanings and the nature of the social work process. By reviewing these antecedent stages, the social worker and enabler are searching for recurrent themes, motifs and insights about the social worker's use of self in the practice arena. How does who we are, because of our background and range of social experience, shape how we practise with service users whose experience may differ radically from our own? Responses to this question come as a result of a process of meta-reflection, a process which integrates the insights from stages one to four.



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