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Research to Practice Series

The importance of a 'Human Connection': Helpful Relationships with Service Users and Linking Social Capital

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families. ICPS is based within the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, in the Faculty of Education and Arts, ACU.

The importance of a 'Human Connection': Helpful Relationships with Service Users and Linking Social Capital

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Issue 9 of the ICPS Research to Practice series examines what makes helpful and productive relationships between clients and services. It addresses the need for a human connection and how this relates to the role of service providers by drawing on the concept of 'linking social capital' to better understand the dynamics of this relationship.

It is based on a journal article and larger study, which aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the service use experiences of families with complex needs, to inform the development of more responsive and integrated service delivery. The study interviewed 80 parents on income support regarding their needs, levels of formal and informal supports and their interactions with services. More information about the study, including links to associated publications, is provided at the end of the issue.



Understanding Helpful Service User Relationships

Research consistently emphasises the importance of the relationship between a worker or service and their clients; and there is evidence that how clients experience the relationship is key to assessing the effectiveness of the relationship (Horvath 2001, cited in Barker & Thomson 2015).

The larger study that informed this issue talked to parents receiving income support about their experiences of using support services. Parents in the study indicated that they had a positive service experience when:

- **The service responded to their individual situation**
- **They were actively linked with other services**
- **There was a focus on their children's needs**
- **There was communication between services**
- **There was continuity with a worker or service**
- **There was a *human connection* with the worker**

Human Connection

1 'Listening' was the most commonly noted behaviour that contributed to a helpful service experience. Listening behaviours involved giving time. Parents felt that this conveyed a message of respect for clients, and for their perspectives and needs.

"They all listened, I think that's the best answer I could give that they all listened and handled the problem with the right responses and things like that." (Parent)

2 Being treated 'nicely', as equals, and as individuals worthy of respect was identified by a number of parents as a key feature of a positive relationship with a helping agency or worker. Parents discussed the value they placed on being recognised as an individual, rather than being treated as a category.

"But also just talking to them [agency offering concrete support] is nice. I really like that and it sort of makes me want to become a volunteer doing something like that myself. . ." (Parent)



3 The worker or service being genuine, and showing real interest and concern provided a basis for parents to trust them. They reacted positively to workers who were perceived as going the extra mile – stretching the professional boundary.

“She seemed concerned, you know, genuinely concerned not just as a counsellor, but as a person, and that came across . . . she was being professional but at the same time I could see that she was, had that little bit of concern, “well what about yourself? You have got to look after yourself too”. You know? Which was really, really, great which gave me a bit of confidence to go ahead and do some other things.” (Parent)

4 Being non-judgemental: Workers that conveyed acceptance enabled access to a range of resources, including psychological services, concrete practical support and opportunities to ‘give back’. Feeling judged was identified as a disincentive to help-seeking, possibly affecting the resources available to people in the future.

“ . . . when my husband was out of work, no fault of his own. And we had no money and I sent him to go to one of these places and they actually rang me up because they didn’t believe him that he actually had a wife and children at home. Then all they gave him was a little bag that had a packet of Weet-Bix and a bit of tea in it. And I think they gave him a \$10 voucher to go to Woolies or something. He said, never again.” (Parent)

The degree to which parents perceived that workers and services displayed these behaviours either contributed to or detracted from their experience of seeking help. The parents who reported positive experiences, and who trusted their worker or service, were often then enabled to access other services. This could form the basis for major change in people’s lives.

On the other hand, parents who reported negative experiences with workers could experience a loss of resources, being unable or unlikely to access services again. Parents could be discouraged from seeking help if their previous relationships with service providers have been perceived as unhelpful or humiliating, and choose to rely completely on their own social networks, which may be fragile or limited.



Different types of relationships: What is social capital?

Fostering relationships and support is essential. However, it is important to be aware that not all relationships are the same. We have different expectations of family, friends, and formal services or institutions.

Social capital is a term that describes the relationships, connections and social networks of individuals, families and groups, which provide these individuals with access to valuable resources. It provides a way to think about what makes relationships productive – what makes it a form of capital. These resources or forms of capital can be of economic, cultural or social value.

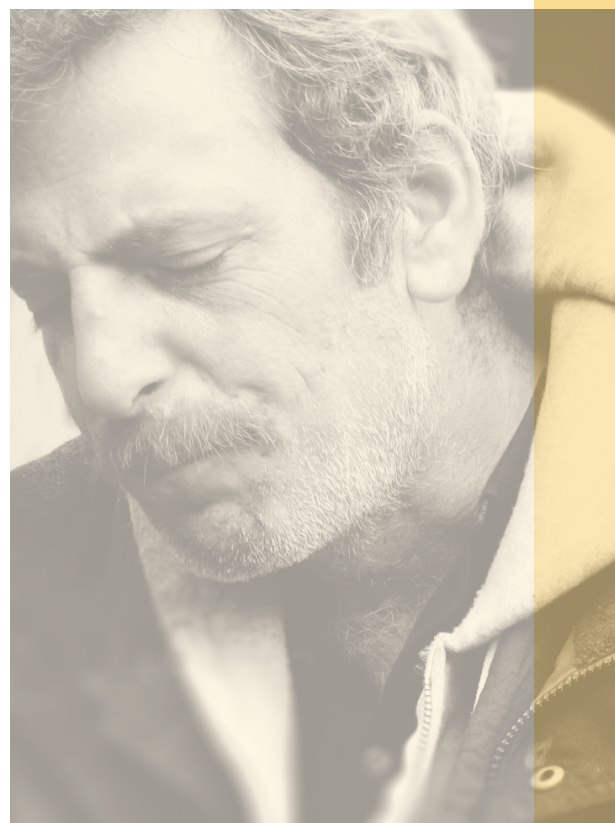
Trust, shared expectations and reciprocity – exchanging resources for mutual benefit - are central to relationships functioning as social capital.

The three types of social capital include:

1. **Bonding social capital:** The relationships, connections and social ties between people who are in similar situations, such as families, friends and peers
2. **Bridging social capital:** The connections between more diverse social groups, such as people who meet through work, school, church or sport
3. **Linking social capital:** The relationships between service providers and clients, which can provide access to valued resources outside of informal social networks

Although they may not use these terms, many workers and services seek to build 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital by assisting their clients to establish and strengthen relationships with families, friends and peers (bonding); and to participate in social groups and activities, such as work and sport (bridging). Through these informal and formal networks, services seek to help their clients to access valued resources.

'Linking' social capital – the relationship between services and clients - is less discussed as a means of building social capital. These service-client relationships constitute social capital if the service has resources that the client can access (such as support), and if the client trusts them. However, these relationships can also include a **power imbalance**, in which the worker or service may hold more power than the client.



Linking social capital and helpful service user relationships

Although linking social capital – the social connections between services and clients – is usually characterised by a power imbalance, this study showed that human connections are highly valued by clients, and can facilitate positive service experiences. Parents identified the importance of being treated as an equal, as well as the feeling of being treated ‘nicely’.

Although power differences are recognised in service-client relationships, it is being treated like a human – **the exchange and acknowledgement of each other’s humanity** – that is the important interaction which facilitates linking social capital.

The ability to engage in these positive relationship building activities can be affected by program and policy factors, such as funding constraints and narrowly defined outcomes of funding agreements. These structural factors can impact upon workers’ capacity to provide the time to listen, to be flexible and provide an individualised response.

Despite these constraints, many different workers in varying organisational contexts can provide these positive relationships. In this research, participants identified positive relationships with support workers, psychologists, general practitioners, lawyers, school librarians, counsellors, alternative health practitioners, teachers, tenancy workers, and social workers. Organisational contexts also varied and included private practices, non-government agencies, and state and federal government service providers such as schools, hospitals and Centrelink.

This research reminds us that the essential human interaction is a pivotal component of providing support; and can be provided through any type of interaction – from a passing interaction over the counter, through to long-term case management.



About the Study

The study upon which this issue draws was completed by the Institute of Child Protection Studies in 2009. Funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the project aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the kinds of social resources used by parents, what their needs were for services and the reasons why some were not connected to formal support. The study conducted interviews and focus groups with 80 parents in Victoria and Queensland. The project was approved by the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee.

This Research to Practice Issue focused on findings of a subset of data, which were presented in a peer-reviewed journal article in *Australian Social Work* in 2015. See below for references for the project report and the journal article.

More information and the full report is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps

References and Useful Resources

Barker, J., & Thomson, L. (2015). *Helpful relationships with service users: Linking social capital*. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 130 - 145.

Butler, K., McArthur, M., Winkworth, G., Saunders, V., Layton-Thompson, M., Conroy, S., Crowe, R., & Rollins, W. (2009). *Getting what we need: Families' experiences of services*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU.

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