Editorial

Gillian Ruch & Juliet Koprowska

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The first three of the papers in this issue focus on aspects of staff support and, in differing ways, speak to the widespread concerns about staff wellbeing, resilience and retention that are recognised in the diverse national contexts – Ireland, Denmark and Southern Europe – which the papers represent. In each instance, the paper draws together both the individual and institutional dimensions of the workers' role and the importance of keeping them in dialogue. This imperative perhaps has never been more significant given the propensity towards pathologising and blaming the individual that is pervading contemporary society, more generally, and the social work professional practice, in particular.

In the context of child protection work in Ireland, Maria Dempsey and Carmel Halton report on the experiences of social workers who have been actively involved in establishing and participating in practice-based peer support groups. Of note is their recognition of the level of attention required by individuals and the organisation to maximise the likelihood of the groups becoming established and then being effective.

The aforementioned commonalities in health and social work professional practice across national contexts is highlighted by Linda Lundgaard Andersen and Betina Dybbroe in their paper entitled 'Introspection as intra-professionalism in social and health care', which explores the adverse effects of the downsizing and standardising trends in welfare services and consequently, the ever-growing importance of workplace learning in the Danish context. Drawing on the Lorenzian concept of 'scenic understanding', two cases of professional practice are explored in detail. Arising out of their analysis, the centrality of personal and professional subjectivity and life history is underlined and a crucial role is given to work-based learning spaces that facilitate in-depth professional understanding.

The third paper in this issue, written by George Karpetis and Eleni Athanasiou, focuses on professional supervision training for practitioners. The authors argue that supervision training is under researched and under theorised, and report on a small-scale research project, exploring the impact of a psychodynamic relational theoretical framework on the practices of trainee social work fieldwork supervisors. In concluding their paper, Karpetis & Athanasiou emphasise the importance of 'building a trusting relationship in educational settings, the way empathy is operationalised in educational practice and the theory reliant "communication skills" required for effective student field practice supervision'.

Moving away from support systems for practitioners, the remaining papers in this issue take a wide-ranging look at different aspects of social work education and practice. In her paper on failing students, Jo Finch makes an important contribution to the field of practice education, addressing the challenges faced by members of organisational systems in English practice education – Practice Assessment Panels – when confronted by situations where failure is on the cards. Finch positions the panels as projective fields and suggests that paying greater attention to the projective forces and emotional climate

of these forums can enhance our understanding of how these challenging encounters are responded to.

At a more individual, but deeply relational, level Joseph Walsh's paper explores the impact on people with a diagnosis of schizotypal personality disorder. In concentrating on the contribution of social work to interventions in this field Walsh counters the dominance of medicalised responses and highlights the centrality of carefully managed relationships and their capacity to enable individuals to develop strategies that help them to be more broadly relational within their wider life context.

Robyn Munford and Jackie Sanders draw our attention to the role of resistance in relationships between social workers and young people. Through their empirical research understandings of resistance are unsettled, its capacity to be framed as a positive dynamic are explored and 'relationships took the form of change-focused partnerships where workers harnessed resistance as a useful resource.'

The final paper by Stephen Jordan pays attention to a widely recognised but under researched aspect of social practice – the role of humour. Jordan suggests that not only is humour a mechanism for managing stress between professionals – what is often referred to as 'gallows humour' – but that it has the potential to be a conduit for expressing our shared humanity with both colleagues and with service users too.

Taken as a whole, this issue gives us considerable food for thought about how sound social work education, practice and continuing professional development requires us to hold firmly in mind how we understand, establish and experience relationships and similarly how others understood, establish and experience relationships with us. In these globally challenging times of mistrust, fracture and dissent these are important messages for us to hold on to.

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