

# Safeguarding Conference: Risk and Vulnerability

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**Bucks New University**

The concept 'use of self' and the importance  
of openness and emotional availability in  
relationship-based practice

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*Why the relationships we  
create are important*

## Relationship-based practice

The relationships we create are fundamental to understanding and action – it is this understanding and the meaning given to experience that shapes the way we work with people

## **Summary: why the relationships we create are important**

- 1. Building relationships aid the assessment and intervention process (Trevithick 2003)**
- 2. The relationships we build can help lower defences and help to avoid triggering defensive reactions (Trevithick 2011)**
- 3. Successful relationships can open up new possibilities and horizons for people (Miller 1986)**

**Summary: why the relationships we create are important**

- 4. The findings of neuroscience confirm the importance of relationship in human growth and development (Siegal 2012: 33)**
- 5. The relationship encourages a focus on 'emotional dimensions' in social work (Munro 2011b)**
- 6. Constructive inter-professional relationships are essential for effective practice (Turnell 2012)**
- 7. Good relationships allow us to grow – personally and professionally**

# Using our senses to gather evidence

It is essential to look for evidence that confirms your hypothesis – but also evidence that refutes what you think to be happening. The five senses:

- ❖ sight
- ❖ hearing
- ❖ touch
- ❖ smell
- ❖ taste

The importance of:

- (a) the handshake in social work
- (b) giving words to feeling felt but not named

# The 'professional use of self'

## England (1986) – the ‘use of self’

*The concept of the ‘use of self’ has a long-established place in social work thinking. It has, curiously, both a central and a marginal place. It is central because accounts of social work have consistently recognized the importance of the worker’s behaviour and relationship with the client, especially in accounts of social casework. It is marginal because, despite this recognition, the process has been one generally seen as inaccessible to analysis or proper discussion. . . . in social work it is not possible to make a division between the actor and his [sic] knowledge - that the knowledge is realized only by the worker. So for the social worker the nature of this ‘use of self’ is an issue too central, too essential, to be given only a marginal theoretical status; it is a problem which must be solved. . . . social work is distinct because its workers are necessarily themselves wholly involved and because their professional focus is upon the shifting and varied complexity of people’s ‘whole’ lives, not upon narrowly defined and functional matters.*

(England 1986: 40-41)

# The importance of self knowledge

## It can:

### 1. enhance our capacity to understand others:

*The capacity to be in touch with the service user's feelings is related to the worker's ability to acknowledge his or her own. Before a worker can understand the power of emotions in the life of the client, it is necessary to discover its importance in the worker's own experience. (Schulman 1999: 156)*

### 2. enhance our capacity to understand ourselves and how we come across

### 3. help us to understand how service users 'use themselves' and the extent to which they can use their self-knowledge to understand others

## Positive relationships are conveyed in the 'professional use of self'

- a) facial expression
- b) tone of voice/intensity/rhythm/speed and quality of speech
- c) choice of words/vocabulary/articulation
- d) other gestures we adopt
- e) mode of dress (Lishman 2009)

The 'professional use of self' calls for practitioners to be aware of 'how we come across' - our body language, default expressions and behaviour - and how to adapt these in ways that aid communication and engagement

## a. default facial expression

**A great deal is communicated through our facial expression, particularly eye contact. Some examples of our default facial expression include:**

A warm and inviting face 😊

A calm and comforting face 😌

A face that's had to read ○

A face that conveys disinterest ○

A sad face ☹️

A worried face (e.g. such as a frowning face) 😞 etc.

## b. default vocal expression

Examples of differences in tone of voice, mode of speech, the speed that we use to communicate:

- ❖ speaking with a hurried tone
- ❖ speaking with a dreary, boring, monosyllabic, non-committal or disinterested tone
- ❖ speaking with a warm, caring, inviting, inclusive tone
- ❖ speaking with an excited, interested, animated tone
- ❖ speaking with changes in tone in order to emphasise certain points

## c. default choice of words/vocabulary

### Importance of cultural sensitivity . . .

- ❖ our choice of words can have a profound impact
- ❖ people's class, race, gender, age and other identities tend to **shape communication** among different groups
- ❖ failure to understand **cultural differences** – and differences in power and status - can lead to misunderstandings/ communication breakdown

## d. default gestures we adopt

There are **gestures or mannerisms** we adopt of which we are unaware - we may fidget, click pens, chew our lips, overuse certain words or phrases, such as ‘you know what I mean’.

The most effective way to identify these gestures is through the use of a video recording. If this is not available, honest but gentle feedback from a colleague can be very helpful.

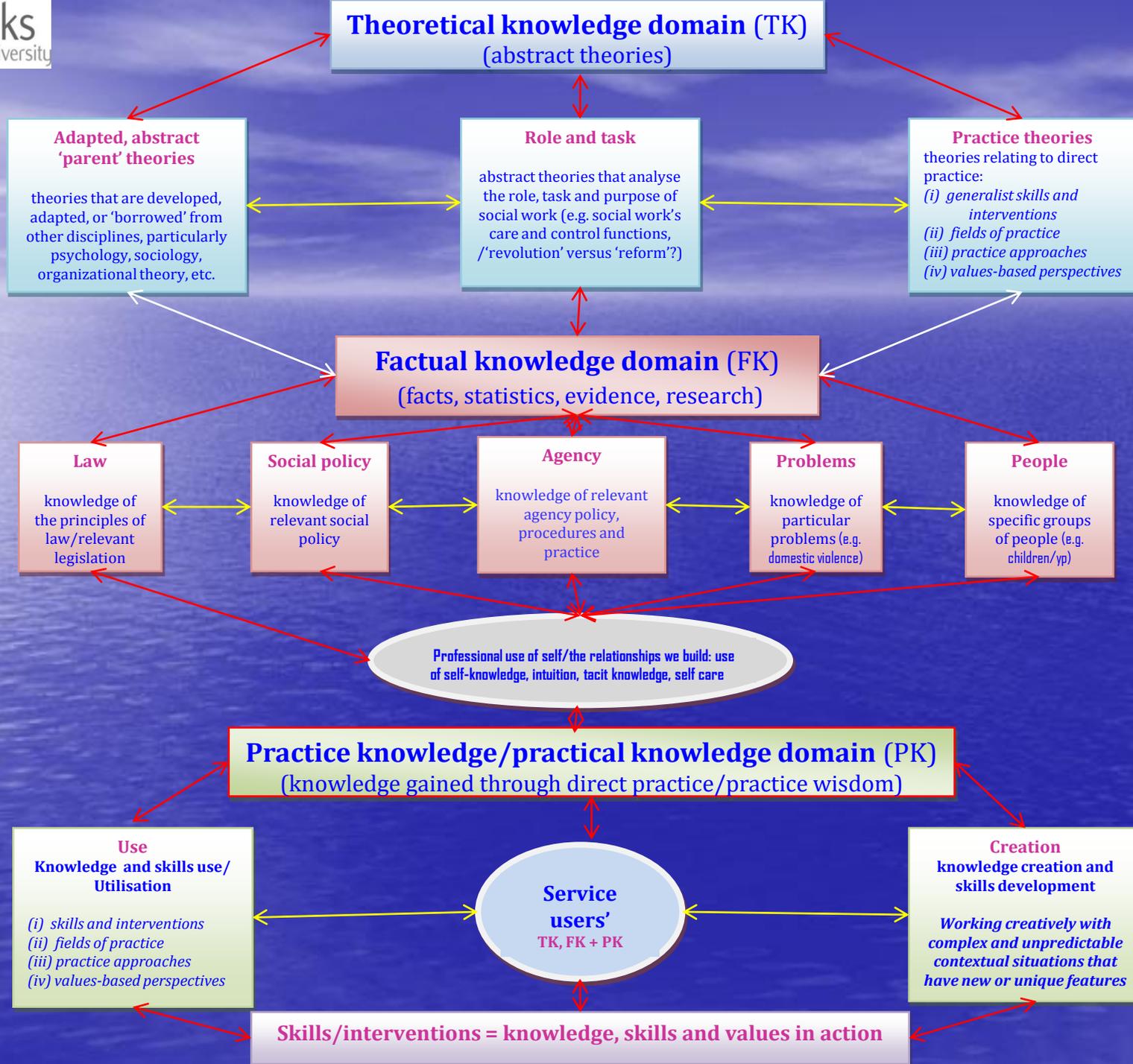
## e. default mode of dress

A fifth area where the professional use of self is important relates to how we dress and what is communicated through our appearance.

*'The way we dress communicates symbolically something of ourselves, and will have symbolic meaning for clients (and colleagues) depending on age, culture, class and context' (Lishman 2009: 29).*

## Working from our *'best self'* - being reliable and consistent

The term 'best self' integrates **what we know with who we are**. It describes the knowledge, skills, experience and qualities we bring to an encounter – and also a recognition of the limits of our capacities in certain situations. It describes how we communicate our humanness and compassion in our emotional dialogue with others – and the extent to which we can 'be ourselves' in ways that are honest, open, emotionally available and spontaneous but also disciplined in ways that address the purpose of the work to be undertaken.



# A lexicon of 80 generalist skills/interventions

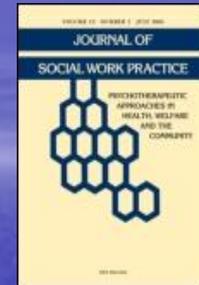
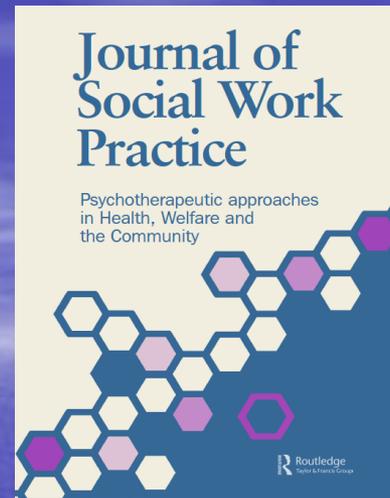
- 1 interpersonal skills
- 2 verbal communication skills
- 3 non-verbal communication skills
- 4 observation skills
- 5 listening skills
- 6 communicating active listening responses
- 7 memory skills
- 8 engagement skills
- 9 emotional attunement skills
- 10 problem-solving/decision-making
- 11 creating a rapport/establishing a relationship that gives confidence
- 12 welcoming skills
- 13 demonstrating sympathy
- 14 demonstrating empathy
- 15 using intuition/intuitive reasoning
- 16 information gathering/collecting baseline data
- 17 open questions
- 18 closed questions
- 19 *what* questions
- 20 *why* questions
- 21 circular questions
- 22 hypothetical questions
- 23 paraphrasing
- 24 clarifying
- 25 summarizing
- 26 giving feedback thoughtfully
- 27 inviting feedback openly
- 28 prompting
- 29 probing
- 30 allowing/using silences
- 31 signalling the feelings and meanings being expressed
- 32 using self-disclosure
- 33 skilled ability to end a meeting/interview/future contact
- 34 providing help
- 35 giving advice
- 36 providing information
- 37 providing explanations
- 38 offering praise/validation/encouragement
- 39 providing reassurance
- 40 using persuasion and being directive
- 41 providing practical assistance
- 42 providing support
- 43 providing care
- 44 breaking 'bad news'
- 45 modelling and social skills training
- 46 reframing
- 47 offering interpretations
- 48 recognising/adapting to need
- 49 counselling skills
- 50 containing anxiety
- 51 enabling skills/empowering/inspiring others
- 52 negotiating skills
- 53 contracting skills
- 54 networking skills
- 55 working collaboratively/in partnership
- 56 mediation skills
- 57 advocacy skills
- 58 assertiveness skills
- 59 challenging/confrontational skills
- 60 dealing with hostility /aggression
- 61 managing violence
- 62 managing professional boundaries/confidentiality
- 63 recording/form filling skills
- 64 note taking/minute-taking skills
- 65 report writing skills
- 66 letter writing skills
- 67 computer skills/IT skills
- 68 telephone skills
- 69 skilled use of mobile phones/text messaging
- 70 presentation skills
- 71 chairing/facilitation skills
- 72 using supervision creatively
- 73 organizational /administrative skills
- 74 reading/comprehension skills
- 75 analytic/thinking skills
- 76 skilled use of interventions targeted at structural barriers
- 77 skilled use of diplomacy
- 78 skilled use of touch
- 79 skilled use of humour
- 80 skilled use of social media

# Managerialism - a barrier to relationship-based practice

1. it reduces social work to an **outcome** or a **measurement** and not a helpful, creative and meaningful encounter
2. it reduces people - and **human need and real concerns** - to a 'target' or an 'outcome, and people to a 'commodity'
3. its focus on timescales, performance indicators, a one-size-fits-all and a tick-box approach denies the **situational uniqueness** that every case carries, and the **complex** and **social nature** of problems encountered, particularly when being addressed too late
4. it denies the importance of **professional knowledge**, skills and expertise and replaces a **trust** in professional judgements with prescribed policies procedures
5. it ignores the **importance of emotions** as essential to learning, the change process, and people's quality of life (see Munro 2011b)



gaps



The importance of relationship-based approaches, and psychosocial and systemic thinking in social work is being promoted and being taken forward by GAPS – a social work membership organisation set up in 1984 to promote therapeutic approaches in social work.

Information about events, papers and articles can be accessed free from the GAPS website <http://www.gaps.org.uk> or by emailing [info@gaps.org.uk](mailto:info@gaps.org.uk)

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