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Reframing social work assessment: Connecting spaces and people

SYSTEMIST

Published by the UK Systems Society

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Abstract

This paper seeks to reframe social work assessment, reflect on complexity, autopoietic theory, narrative, and life stories, and introduces a conceptual interactive practice tool, Connecting Spaces. This tool is being designed to facilitate assessments and therapeutic work with children and vulnerable adults in person and online. Social work is concerned with systems involving people, often during crisis, their environments, and networks where engagement and assessment cannot function outside of communication between assessor and assessed. Social workers are nested within their own personal, biological, and professional networks including employing agency and professional regulatory bodies. Complexity arises because social workers must condense information into stories of what might happen and make sense how best to support people. Munro (2011) in her review of child protection explains social workers try to understand and help people and she reflects on the interplay between conscious analysis and intuition in assessment and decision making. Ten years on from Munro's recommendations The Case for Change (Children's Social Care Independent Review, 2021) highlights the continued need for less bureaucratic process-led practice and more direct work with children and families.

Given the prominence of attachment theory in social work, it is a surprise Siegal's Mindsight, which is the capacity to clarify, label and analyse the internal emotional world and its response to the external word, has gained little attention in social work. The potential for Mindsight's application in social work is enhanced by narratives, storytelling and life story therapy with children and vulnerable adults. Connecting Spaces can be used to create a narrative about the person's life: past, present and/or future. The aim is to inform and improve decision making by enabling the person's understanding, views, wishes and feelings to be explored, heard, presented, evidenced, and considered. Further, it has the potential to

present and consider multi-perspectives and narratives such as in family and wider systems. This flexible communication conceptual tool is designed to have a range of uses and it is intended to be provided in both digital and physical form to suit a range of needs. This tool does not aim to replace but to enhance building relationship, safety, and communication in direct work with a child or vulnerable adult.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reflect on social work practice – principally assessments and ongoing therapeutic-based direct work. The paper has taken years to germinate and is the result of conversations by three people, a social work academic, an independent social worker specialising in therapeutic life story work and a well-being informatics academic. During our collaborations we have come to realise we share a passion in compassion-based practice within social care. Social work is a key social care profession which is concerned with systems involving people, often during crisis, their environments, and networks where engagement and assessment cannot function outside of communication between assessor and assessed. Social workers are nested within their own personal, biological, and professional networks including their employing agency and professional regulatory bodies (such as Social Work England). Complexity arises because social workers must condense information into stories of what might happen and make sense how best to support people (Heslop & Meredith, 2019; Munro et al., 2017). Munro (2011), in her review of child protection, explains social workers try to understand and help people and she reflects on the interplay between conscious analysis and intuition in assessment and decision making. Through this article the authors seek to identify some difficulties in social work assessments, not by blaming practitioners or those being assessed but to appreciate the process of assessment. Through the lens of autopoietic social systems this article suggests communication is the means to reproduce a social sub-system through the assessor's understanding, or sense-forming. From this position the authors seek to offer an alternative based on compassion, mindsight and communication and introduce a conceptual design to facilitate more effective storytelling and narrative-based assessments.

Scene Setting: Social Work Practice and Theory

Social workers undertake assessments to inform decisions about how to intervene with people in situations of need and risk, and the decisions they make can have an enormous impact on people's lives (Heslop and Meredith, 2019). In England Social Work is a legal title and regulated profession through Social Work England. Alongside the complexity of decision making, children and vulnerable adults live within complex environments. Social work is many things to different people and is often misunderstood as there are differing expectations of social work, which range from implementing social justice within a political agenda to enforcing safeguarding legislation and conformity to societal rules. Social work is about

making sense of complex and difficult situations so that they can understand how to navigate towards solutions. Assessments for practice include an assessment to understand the person, their circumstances and needs and continual assessments and reassessments during ongoing work with people. Consider a long journey, the initial large-scale assessment will map out the journey, decide mode of transport etc., but during the journey assessment is continuous to appraise progress, take in new information etc. So, it is with professional practice, the initial assessment may implement a care plan involving direct therapeutic life-story work with a child, but each session of direct work will involve its own assessment of how to progress and take in new information. To inform assessments practitioners incorporate a range of knowledge, theories, and interventions. Children services in England work with a wide range of people and families; at end of March 2020 there were 389,260 children in need (who require local authority support) which represents 323.7 children per 10000, while 51,510 children had a child protection plan, representing 42.8 children every 10000 (Department for Education, 2020b) and there were 80,080 children looked after by English local authorities in 2020 (Department for Education, 2020c). These statistics highlight the volume of systemic interaction between families, children, children's social services, and social workers. What remains relatively unknown is the actual nature of these interactions.

Echoing previous reviews (for example see Munro's review of child protection, 2011), The Case for Change (The Independent Review of Children's Services, 2021) highlights the need for less bureaucratic process-led practice and more direct work with children and families. While direct work is viewed as the greatest asset that children's social care has it appears grossly underused as statistics suggest that one in three of all social workers in children's services do not work directly with children or their families (Department for Education, 2020a), and those in direct practice spend less than one third of their time with families. The Case for Change interim report states,

Children, families and professionals have all told the review that too often the social care system doesn't (sic) live up to our aspiration of supporting families to provide safety, stability and love to children, leaving social workers with insufficient time and resources to do the vital work with children that inspired them to enter the profession (The Independent Review of Chidren's Services, 2021).

Regardless of the duration, type, or focus of any ongoing direct social work, all children and families involved in children's social services will have been assessed and assessment is a key function of social work (Heslop and Meredith, 2019).

Social work exists at the crossroads where social issues and social change intersect and social workers often assess people during crisis to ascertain need and access to social services. Professional assessments require practitioners to understand how to incorporate a range of knowledge, theories, and interventions as they seek to understand a person's circumstances and needs (Adams et al., 2009; Healy, 2014; Oko, 2011). There is much theoretical emphasis on co-production between practitioner and service recipient, through for instance task-centred practice (McGinnis, 2013; Reid, 1997), social systems and environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), personalisation (Stevens et al., 2018), power (Green & Featherstone, 2014), relationship-based practice (Ruch et al., 2010), and anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002). Social workers apply theory to practice all the time – consciously and unconsciously using formal and informal theories. Beckett (2018) differentiate between formal theories which have a recognisable proponent or theoretician, and informal theories, which cannot be attributed to a recognisable theoretician, but nonetheless inform how social workers assess, form opinions, and decide on interventions. However, theory is not truth, rather it is an interpretive tool, a tool which facilitates or enables an understanding. Truth is perceived differently, and there are different perspectives and opinions on the same situation without either being wrong or right. Theories are not constant; they evolve and emerge in response to systemic, cultural, and environmental variants. Theories emerge to challenge existing ones and ideas which were once viewed as fact become defunct, such as the earth being flat. It is helpful to view theories as fuzzy concepts that exist to understand or explain phenomenon. Fuzziness occurs when the boundaries and application of information are not clear-cut and can vary considerably according to context and fuzziness helps to explain theory is less concrete, and more subjective, than it at first seems. From this perspective it is important to consider who arbitrates what is true and how opinions are formed, and assessments can only be informed opinion. Klein (1998;2004) and Kahneman (2011) identify the cognitive processes involved in recognising patterns, analysis, and intuition in forming opinions and assessing situations. Quite simply humans select information, consciously and unconsciously, to make sense of situations and therefore assessments, along with theorising, are highly subjective as they involve a human assessor.

Through theories for practice, it is argued, social workers can exercise different possibilities of understanding people's needs and the purpose of their own practice. The act of theorising during assessment acknowledges the subjectivity inherent in assessment and professional sense-forming. Identifying theories for practice and assessment should result in more transparency and increased objectivity. Garrett (2018) argues contemporary social work operates within four competing and distinct theoretical approaches: therapeutic, socialist-collectivist, individual reformist, and managerialist-technocratic perspectives. The ways practitioners interact with these theoretical approaches influence practitioner' opinion, whereby a Marxist, within the socialist-collective approach, may be more in-tune with issues relating to poverty than a proponent of neoliberalism, within the managerialist-technocratic approach, who may be more in-tune with markets in the management of services. In contrast to Garrett, Healy (2014) provides a dynamic approach to theory and models of practice, classifying contemporary social work theory into five categories: systems theories, problem-solving theories, strengths and solution-focused theories, modern critical social work theories a d post-modern theory. Theories are therefore seen as the means to organise and present understandings and interpretations. They are explanations and mechanisms to communicate how we experience phenomenon and perceive the world we inhabit. Theories are also the ways individuals create the world they inhabit, consider any fundamentalist, political or religious, and how they perceive reality in contrast to others who do not share their worldview.

Practice-based assessments are difficult and despite efforts to standardise them, through statutory (see Department for Education, 2018) and practice frameworks, such as Signs of Safety, (Turnell, 2012); the practitioner input, conscious and unconscious, maintains a strong influence on the assessment. The evidence regarding childcare assessments is social workers tend to focus on negative aspects of children's identities (Thomas & Holland, 2009), select information already contained in case files (Hackett & Taylor, 2014), focus on static family functioning in the present rather than adaptive capacity (Platt & Riches, 2016), focus on safeguarding (Heslop et al., 2019), and practice frameworks attempt to regulate assessor subjectivity in line with potential safeguarding concerns (Baginsky et al., 2020). It seems interpretation and opinions, key aspects of assessment, hold sway on the assessment process which may result in those being assessed feeling outside of the process or left to feel they must disprove the practitioner's interpretation or opinion. From an anti-oppressive and empowering perspective, Adams et al.

(2009), in their reflections on social work in a complex world, explain that social workers should not consider their employing agency and the social care process is non-oppressive to the people they work with.

Notwithstanding, often exemplary, practice efforts by many social workers, many children involved in children's services comment they have poor relationships with their social workers and that they are sceptical about the review process in presenting their views (Diaz et al., 2018) . Children are too infrequently involved in decisions made about them, decisions which tend to be based on the practitioner's interpretation rather than the child or family's (Hackett & Taylor, 2014; Roose et al., 2009), interpretations that can vary between practitioners. It seems, assessing practitioners represent the views of children and vulnerable adults only when they correlate with the assessor's perceptions, opinions, and recommendations. The resulting systemic relations between social worker as assessor and child/ family as assessed is little understood and certainly under theorised. In this arena it is all too easy to take a decisive view which results in conflict between assessor and assessed and to blame the practitioner as risk averse or under-skilled. This blaming process is supported by the defensive reaction of the assessed (Rosenberg, 2015), whose predisposition to fear the possible consequences of the assessment is exacerbated by the assessor's apparent preoccupation with the risk and safeguarding discourse and possible focus on information which supports this perspective. Applying fuzzy logic, in that nothing is ever wholly true due to partial truths, and fuzzy concepts to theory allows for the recognition of diverse and alternative explanations to phenomenon based on perspective. Social workers may theoretically seek to work collaboratively with people to co-produce assessments that are anti-oppressive, though in reality families may feel concern at a system they perceive as over-focused on safeguarding which prohibits them seeking support from social workers (Heslop et al, 2019). The dichotomy between assessed and assessor appears to be beyond human agency when reports are consistent about the systematic reproduction of the divergence. However, social work and systems involving people, engagement and assessments cannot function outside of communication, at some form, between assessor and the assessed. The communication process, or how communication is enacted, constructed, and comprehended are key to understand social work practice.

Luhmann (1986; 1995) conceptualised autopoietic social systems through momentary elements whereby understanding in communication transactions is held by the listener rather than the speaker. The resonance with social work assessments is clear as the assessor holds the role of decision-making over the assessed. While not universally accepted, Luhmann's conceptualization of autopoietic social systems offers the theoretical possibility to examine, understand and explain the processes involved in the production and reproduction of social work assessments and to move beyond agency and the blaming of individuals (Mingers, 2002). Through the shift from a reproduction of relatively stable elements to a reproduction of momentary events Luhmann alters the concept of autopoiesis. The system is urged to constant production of new elements because the elements of the system are temporary and should the autopoiesis stop then the system disappears immediately. Luhmann considered communication, through the three elements of information, utterance and understanding, as the means for autopoietic social system reproduction. Luhmann argued that the third communication element understanding is central to this process and meaning and therefore communication is ultimately determined through the listener's understanding. By applying Luhmann's autopoietic social systems model, the phenomenon of social work assessment appears as temporary sub-systems, involving assessor and assessed, whereby communication is constructed by the assessor who seeks to understand the assessed person's information and utterances but through a lens that is ultimately based on a risk and safeguarding discourse. The paradigm is the social worker during the assessment, through autopoietic reproduction, understands, regardless of the assessed person's utterance or meaning (their narrative), risk and safeguarding as primary issues. This process drives the ongoing present and future work with the child and family.

Shifting the Paradigm: Reflections on Communication and Mindsight.
To address the issues identified through autopoietic systems theory we suggest a change in perspective of assessment to:

1. focus on learning about the person being assessed, their narrative, rather than evaluation (based on a safeguarding discourse).
2. create safe spaces for assessor and assessed person to explore together and co-produce the work.
3. embed non-violent communication in connecting to self and others.

Assessment often will lead to a defence reaction and closing down in those assessed (Rosenberg, 2015). This reaction negatively impacts the wellbeing of all involved, including the assessors. Humans are embodied beings and communication and relations with others has a direct impact on the nervous system, and indeed on the immune system (Rauch, 2020; Rauch et al., 2019). Vast amount of research is available to suggest that the positivity/negativity perceived in everyday interactions impact on health as well as relationship and communication with others (Maturana & Verden-Zöller, 2008; Rosenberg, 2015; Sice et al., 2018; Stowell, 2020; Varela et al., 2016). A context of play and learning: 'We are here to learn together about your experience and support you in your wellbeing and your aspirations' is very different from a context of evaluation and assessment. The context of learning and support will focus on exploring about the person's narratives, perspectives, strengths, assets and needs as well as adversities. Research in neuroscience, autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 2012), polyvagal theory (Porges, 2009), psychology (Levine, 2010; Siegel, 2010), suggests that curiosity and learning are only possible within safe spaces, i.e., spaces where we feel safe to trust and connect with ourselves and others (Figure 1).
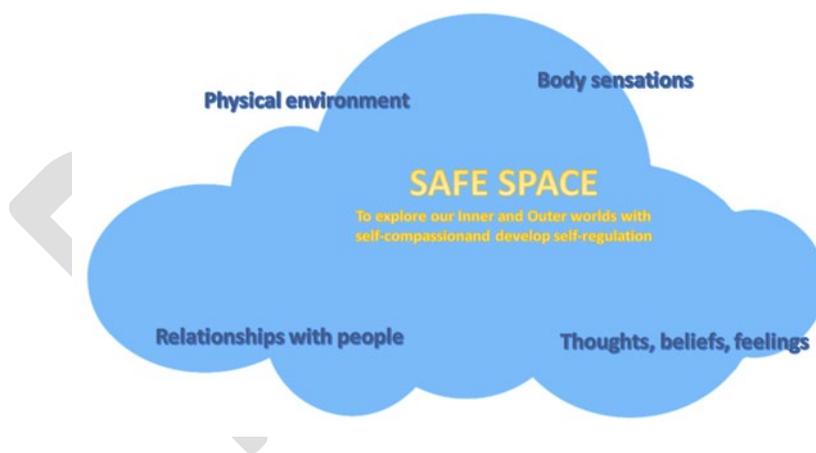

Figure 1. Safe Spaces to promote self-regulation

By processing information from the environment through the senses and the nervous system we continually evaluate risk. Porges (2009) coined the term 'neuroception' to describe how neural circuits distinguish whether situations are safe or dangerous. His polyvagal theory proposes a neurophysiological model of safety (Porges, 2009). The model emphasises, safety is defined by feeling safe and not by the removal of threat. Feeling safe is dependent on the state of the autonomic

nervous system and on detection of cues of safety in the environment, via neuroception. This safe space can be a challenge for the practitioner who feels threatened by the concern of missing risk, vulnerability and safeguarding and for the child or their family by the imminent concern over the possible consequences of an adverse assessment.

Neuroception takes place in primitive parts of the brain, without conscious awareness (Porges, 2009). It is a bodily feeling. It can be brought to cognitive awareness through a balanced focus on the present moment information from the senses and body sensations. Rothschild (2011) argues that balancing attention focus between the senses and bodily sensations allows for regulating ways of feeling in the present moment. Siegel (2010) proposes a 'wheel of awareness' practice to include awareness of thoughts, feelings, images and connectedness to others, as a way of integrating awareness and promoting compassion to self and others, and thus promoting self-regulation (Ogwu et al., 2020; Rothschild, 2011; Sice et al., 2018; Siegel, 2010). Figure 1 points to this important aspect of safe spaces, the balanced awareness of both inner and outer environments. Our awareness of and our particular way of being and engaging in our environment brings forth a world. Any perturbation in our internal or external environment is perceived through our human biological and psychological embodiment in the context of the situation we are in, and this impacts what we 'see' and 'interpret' and how we communicate (Maturana & Varela, 2012; Varela et al., 2016).

Rosenberg (2015) developed a specific non-violent approach to communication— speaking and listening—that leads to give from the heart, connect with ourselves and with each other in a way that allows natural compassion to flourish. While a detailed reflection on the approach is not within the scope of this article, it is important to emphasise the objective of the non-violent communication process. i.e. to develop honest, empathic relationship with ourselves and the others is an essential element of the safe space concept. This perspective is echoed in Maturana and Varela's work in autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 1992), emphasising the importance of respecting others as a source of richness, not as a source for judgement and thus oppression. Communication processes that nurture human flourishing of those involved require ongoing social learning. Enforced static mechanism of assessment and evaluation, constitute impaired human systems, that have depersonalized their members (Maturana and Varela, 1992). Bowlby (1997) identified how people develop different attachment styles depending on early

experiences of care: either secure or insecure, in its basic interpretation. These early experiences shape the Internal Working Model; whether we learn that we are good or bad, loveable or unlovable, competent or helpless, that caregivers are responsive or unresponsive, trustworthy or untrustworthy, caring or hurtful and whether the world is safe or unsafe, life is worth living or not worth living. How we perceive the world, ourselves, and even how we feel in our body, is affected by our early experiences of a child-parent relationship. These perceptions can often be held unconsciously, for example in our autonomic nervous system. Dana (2018) used the metaphor of a ladder to represent this; at the top of the ladder, there is a sense of security, safety with an ability to be social and engaged. The security drops as we move down the ladder, the middle rung represents feeling unsafe, overwhelmed, and acting in a dis-organised way and at the bottom of the ladder we feel numb, collapsed, shut down and avoidant.

Given the prominence of attachment theory in social work, it is a surprise Siegal's Mindsight (2010), which is the capacity to clarify, label and analyse the internal emotional world and its response to the external word, has gained little attention in social work. The potential for Mindsight's application in social work is enhanced by narratives, storytelling and life story therapy with children and vulnerable adults (Moore, 2019). Siegal (2010) views the brain as having two different parts, a thinking part and a survival part. If we look at this in terms of polyvagal theory we can see how at the top of the ladder, we are in our thinking brain, in the middle of the ladder, we are in the survival part of our brain operating in fight or flight. At the bottom of the ladder, we are in a freeze survival mode. Siegal's concept of Mindsight offers a way of keeping at the top of our ladder and moving towards more secure attachment styles. Siegal suggests that by noticing and naming we can tame feelings, calm our nervous system, keep in or return to our thinking brain. Awareness is seen as a tool for transformation: moving from unconscious to conscious thought, which is a pre-requisite for change. Narrative theory (White & Epston, 1990) also supports the concept of transformation. Denborough (2014) suggests that the stories we hold about ourselves shape our lives, and those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences may hold negative stories that have been created by themselves or others and confirmed by others or themselves which can lead to negative outcomes in life. Theories of child development such a Piaget and Vygotsky highlight that generally, a child under eight views the world as revolving around themselves, so when a child is abused the only story that may make sense to them at the time may be one of being bad and unlovable. Denborough

(2014) highlights how a story of tragedy, often authored or influenced by other people or wider factors such as poverty, racism, sexism, or violence, can preclude triumph. While we may not be able to change the stories others hold about us, changing the stories we tell about ourselves can be transformative and healing.

Where people hold one narrative line, or a one-sided view, what White and Epston (1990) call a 'thin' story, they can benefit from interventions which provide opportunities for developing a richer, more multi-layered story containing a sense of greater possibilities in their life. Rose (2012) presents a model of Therapeutic Life Story Work which provides an opportunity for the person to understand and tell their story; work towards recovery from trauma, improve how they see themselves and generate more positive possibilities for their future. Golding (2014) identifies storytelling as a valuable tool for helping children and adults learn about their feelings, their inner world of hopes and dreams; providing an experience of feeling understood and not alone in how they feel. Through focusing on narratives and story-telling the assessment becomes a more enlivened experience and a more robust mechanism to support children and vulnerable adults and their families. Stories can impact on how children think and understand relationships, how they understand and see themselves. All children can benefit and grow through stories, they provide a way of talking about inner experience and learning from the experience of others. Similarly, Siegel and Bryson (2012) suggest that in making sense of our childhood experiences by creating a coherent narrative we can 'rewire' our brain, understanding our story can heal the deep wounds, behaviours, and beliefs about ourselves that we carry from our earliest attachments that unconsciously direct our lives.

The concern is that assessments and communication in social work can be listener led and unconsciously biased. This article has theorised on the practice process and conjectured it can, inadvertently, be practitioner-based. No one intends for this to happen and in both assessments and on-going direct work the process has to be reframed towards the service recipient, the child, the vulnerable adult and their families. Concepts such as appreciative inquiry suggest that systems change in the direction in which they inquire, an appreciative approach aims to discover what gives life to a system, what energises people and what they most care about, to produce both shared knowledge and motivation for action. Such strengths-based
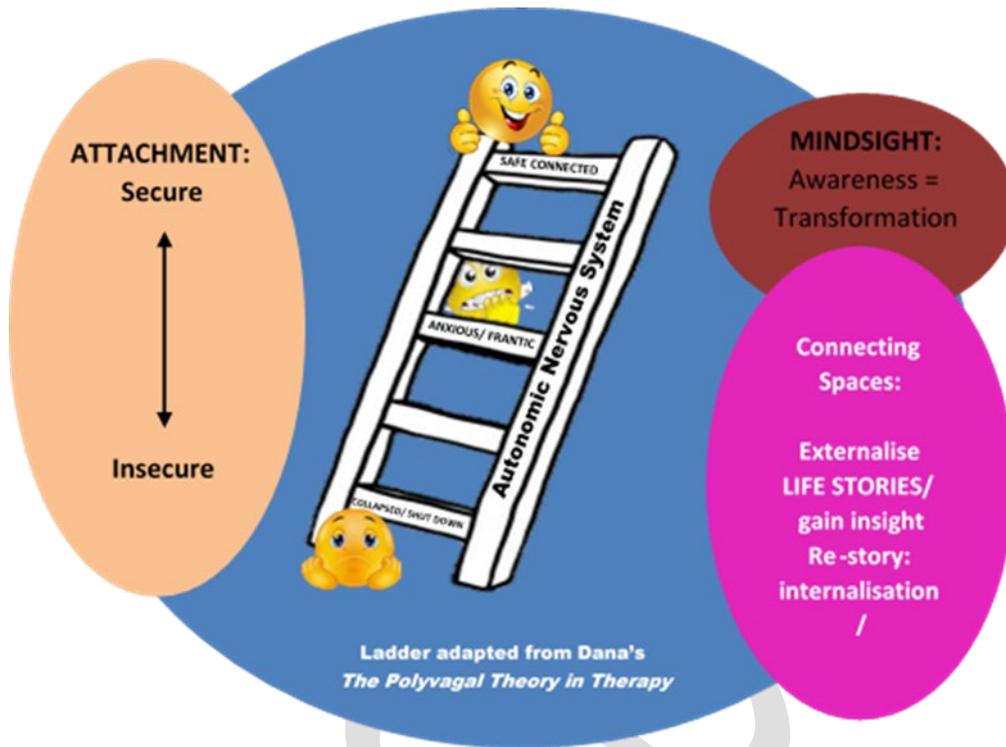
Figure 2. How Attachment, Polyvagal Theory and Mindsight inform Connecting Spaces

approaches focus on what worked or is working well and elicit different information than a focus on what may be wrong and not working, crucial elements of a holistic assessment.

Moving Forward: Connecting Spaces

Identifying a problem, and recognising theoretical solutions is conjecture, the more problematic aspect is evoking change. This article introduced conversations between three distinct professionals and highlighted shared understandings. The next steps are to design a conceptual tool - Connecting Spaces - currently in development, that can be used to support richer, more therapeutic and child led assessments and interventions. Through this tool the aim is for the child or vulnerable person to create a representation of, or narrative about, their life in the past, present and/or imagined future. The aim is to inform and improve decision making by enabling the assessed person's utterances and meaning to be understood from their perspective and undo the reproductive autopoietic social system based

on the listener's understanding. This tool will enable the views, wishes and feelings to be explored, heard, presented, evidenced, and considered and provide the potential to present and consider multi-perspectives and narratives to focus on individual agency, adaptive capacity, and the production of robust and defensible practice. This flexible communication tool is being designed to have a range of uses and will be provided in both digital and 3D physical form to suit a range of needs. The aim of the format is to incorporate the powerful language of play to create a visual picture of the person's view that can be explored, re-storied and shared with others, while appealing to a wide age range. The worker and/ or parent/carer will seek to enter the child or vulnerable person's world, seeing the situation, experience, and associated emotions from their view. Connected Spaces has the potential to inform and enrich assessment, as well as uses in therapeutic work such as Therapeutic Life Story Work, to co-create a transformative meaning. The aim is to increase communication, awareness, insight, and shared understanding. This type of approach has the potential to produce a deeper more meaningful understanding of the child or vulnerable person's internal and external world, explore their relationships and connections with others, explore various hypothetical scenarios, and gain awareness of possibilities. Play can often communicate so much more than conversation, especially where vocabulary may be restricted or undeveloped. This conceptual tool does not aim to replace but to enhance building relationship, safety, and communication in direct work with a child or vulnerable adult. The person is invited to use Connecting Spaces to create a narrative about their lives, past, present and/or future. The aim is to inform and improve decision making by providing a vehicle for the child or vulnerable adult to explore and express their views, wishes and feelings.

Conclusion and Next Step

This article reflects the conversations between three distinct professionals and has conjectured that assessment and communication in social work can, inadvertently, be listener led and unconsciously biased. We consider reframing towards the service recipient, the child, the vulnerable adult and their families by creating a safe space, and seek to identify a strengths-based approach to improve communication and inform decision making by enabling multiple perspectives and narratives. We suggest a focus on individual agency, adaptive capacity to produce robust and defensible practice to undo the reproductive autopoietic social system based on the listener's understanding. Awareness is seen as a tool for transformation: moving from unconscious to conscious thought, which is a pre-requisite for change.

Through focusing on narratives and story-telling the assessment becomes a more enlivened experience and a more robust mechanism to support children and vulnerable adults and their families.

Our hypothesis is that Connected Spaces has the potential to inform and enrich assessment, direct social work practice as well as uses in therapeutic work such as Therapeutic Life Story Work. The purpose of this article is to present ideas now for publication, wider exposure, and potential contribution from other systems thinkers. The next step is to trial the conceptual tool, which will be the focus of another article.

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