

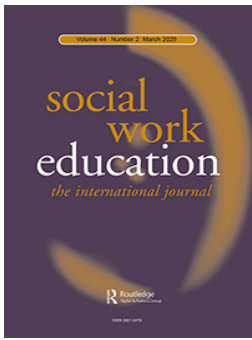
Central Lancashire Online Knowledge (CLoK)

Title	Who's got the power?: A social pedagogical exploration of power, the important element within relationship-based practice
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/55514/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2505733
Date	2025
Citation	Charfe, Lowis (2025) Who's got the power?: A social pedagogical exploration of power, the important element within relationship-based practice. Social Work Education. ISSN 0261-5479
Creators	Charfe, Lowis

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2505733>

For information about Research at UCLan please go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLoK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/policies/>



Who's got the power?: A social pedagogical exploration of power, the important element within relationship-based practice

Lowis Charfe

To cite this article: Lowis Charfe (22 May 2025): Who's got the power?: A social pedagogical exploration of power, the important element within relationship-based practice, Social Work Education, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2025.2505733](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2505733)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2505733>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 22 May 2025.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Who's got the power?: A social pedagogical exploration of power, the important element within relationship-based practice

Louis Charfe

School of Health, Social Work and Sport, University of Central Lancashire, Ireland, UK

ABSTRACT

This article introduces the reader to the Danish social pedagogy concept of the 3 Ps, which assists in helping social workers to set out the boundaries between the *Professional*, *Personal* and *Private* in relationship-based practice. A key aspect of relationship-based practice is the ability to work in an anti-oppressive way, and a critical awareness and ability to understand and analyze power is central to this. The author and her colleague have developed the 3 Ps framework to focus in more detail on the issue of power, to assist social workers and students to address this within their everyday practice. This focuses on a social worker's *approach* to the purpose of their work, being aware of the *needs* and whose needs are being met as well as formal and informal *power* dynamics. The framework aims to assist social workers and students to consider their everyday practice, addressing the issue of power and supporting anti-oppressive practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 March 2024



Accepted 6 May 2025

Keywords

Power; relationship-based practice; social pedagogy; boundaries; empowerment

Introduction

As a response to the rational technical approach (Trevithick, 2014) in social work, there is a growing refocus on relationship-based practice in contemporary social work here in the UK (Ruch, 2018). Relationships, and a social worker's ability to build, sustain, and maintain these, are once again being seen as central to everyday practice (Ingram & Smith, 2018; Monteux & Monteux, 2020). This focus on relationship-based practice has also been strengthened by being a central theme within the recent final reports of both independent reviews of the Scottish and English children's social care systems. (The Scottish review, *The Promise* (2020)) highlights the importance of positive and loving relationships for children and families. Contained within the workforce development section, there is a broad focus on assisting professionals to develop relationship-based practice, with the use of self in 'bringing their whole selves to work' and being 'supported to be human with the people they work with'. Social workers need to be able to manage the core aspects of their work such as risk management 'in relationship-based rather than process driven ways' (*The Promise*,

CONTACT Louis Charfe  lcharfe@uclan.ac.uk  School of Health, Social Work and Sport, University of Central Lancashire, Eden Building, Victoria Road, Preston PR1 2HE, UK

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

2020, p. 100). Echoing the same sentiments and beliefs, the English Independent Review of Children's Social Care (McAlister, 2022, p. 21) in their executive summary states 'that it is loving relationships that hold the solutions for children and families overcoming adversity. While relationships are rich and organic, children's social care can be rigid and linear.' The review goes on to highlight the importance of relationship-based practice throughout and that the solution is to have social care systems that 'realigns to focus on the health of relationships' in all aspects (McAlister, 2022, p. 36).

Relationship-based practice operates within the complex and uncertain work of social work. As Ferguson et al. (2022) and Monteux and Monteux (2020) argue, critical exploration and understanding of the key features, depths, types, and places that these relationships operate in is needed. There needs to be continued critical exploration of what is meant by positive, strengths-based, relationship-based practice and how social workers develop the skills and abilities to build, sustain, and maintain these in their everyday work. With important contributions from social work researchers and academics such as Ferguson et al. (2022), Ruch (2018), the details of relationship-based practice are being investigated to help develop understanding around complexity informed relationship-based practice. As with many aspects of social work theory, there are differing definitions offering explanations to assist in understanding what relationship-based practice is. The Relationships Project (Robinson, 2024), a collaborative network being developed here in the UK to support the growth of relationship-based practice, define it as putting:

relationships first. It unlocks potential and meets need by positioning meaningful and effective relationships as the first order goal, both an end in itself and the means by which other goals will be achieved.

The focus on meaningful and effective relationships is also a core philosophy of social pedagogical practice in recognition that empowerment and change does not happen if there is no meaningful participation (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). With regard to social work Ruch's (2005) definition also echoes the above, stating that relationship-based practice is the conscious use of relationships by a social worker no matter what their professional setting, and is explained as:

'an important source of information for the practitioner to understand how best to help, and simultaneously this relationship is the means by which any help or intervention is offered ...' and 'involves practitioners developing and sustaining supportive professional relationships in unique and challenging situations ...' 'and requires practitioners to re-evaluate their styles of practice and sources of professional knowledge in a social work context of complexity and uncertainty' (Ruch, 2005, p. 113).

Aligned with this social work approach, social pedagogy places the centrality of working toward equitable relationships at the core of any work between a professional and the person or family they are providing support to (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). To briefly explain, social pedagogy is an ethical and conceptual orientation for addressing social inequality through relationship-centered and educational approaches (Charfe & Gardner, 2019). Social pedagogy, therefore, can offer a nuanced practical understanding of power within relationship-based practice. One of the core concepts the author believes is beneficial in

supporting social workers to address the power dynamic within relationship-based practice, is the Danish social pedagogical concept of the 3 Ps (Jappe, 2010). This social pedagogical concept supports the exploration of boundaries within relationship-based practice.

The Danish development of social pedagogy is rooted in daycare institutions where the focus was on positive social relationships and the countering of poor social conditions (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017). This contrasted with the more educational approaches set out in the definitions of Karl Mager and Adolph Diesterweg in mainland Europe at that time (Cameron & Moss, 2011). This concentration and emphasis on the importance of the relationship has continued to underpin Danish developments. Today, it still plays a central role in the child/person centered approach taken by Danish social pedagogues (Jensen, 2011; Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017). The social pedagogical concept of the 3 Ps aids social pedagogues to critically reflect on the ‘professional’ role within relationship-based practice. Whilst the ‘personal’ aspect assists critical self-reflection about what parts of ourselves we bring into relationship-based practice. Finally, the ‘private’ sets out what aspects of ourselves we are not going to share as we navigate complex and ethical relationship-based practice. Along with my colleague, (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024) we have further developed the 3 Ps framework to include a focus on power. This article will explain the framework and how it can be used to support the exploration of boundaries and ethical dilemmas faced daily by social work practitioners, as well as power dynamics that sit within these relationships embedded in an anti-oppressive, relationship-based practice approach. The framework has been successfully used with social work students in modules focused on developing both an understanding of and the skills for relationship-based practice. One example is the third-year module *Relationship-Based Practice in Social Work* at UCLan, taught to final-year students as they prepare for their final placement. The framework has served as a valuable teaching tool to support critical analysis, reflection, and discussion around boundaries and power dynamics. Students are encouraged to draw on real examples of power dynamics they have encountered during placements, exploring the origins and nature of that power. Using the framework, they are then guided to critically reflect on these experiences and consider how to address power dynamics in ways that support anti-oppressive practice, promote inclusion, and foster equity.

The 3 Ps concept explained

Boundaries are needed within all human relationships (Sudbery & Whittaker, 2018) and provide us with feelings of safety and security. The boundaries needed within relationship-based practice can often be difficult to navigate and develop alongside strengths-based and anti-oppressive practice and the complexity of contemporary social work practice (O’Leary et al., 2013). As Hem and Heggen (2003, p. 106, cited in Ruch et al. 2010) identified, there is always tension between ‘a social worker being a “friendly professional”, who is able to be intimate but also distant’. In navigating these complex aspects of relationship-based practice, the social pedagogical concept of the 3 Ps can be highly useful. Used within Danish reform pedagogy (Rothuizen & Harbo, 2017) where social pedagogical practice focuses on individual growth and wider social reform using

relationship-based practice, the concept of the 3 Ps has been developed by Jappe (2010). It consists of the three elements and boundaries between the *Professional*, *Personal*, and *Private* self. When used in practice, it assists social workers to critically reflect and examine their understanding of the boundaries they have or are developing with each individual or family they are working alongside (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024). It supports the development of authentic relationships by exploring the nuances and boundaries between our professional self and the *use of self*; which parts of our personality and private life do we share to help form authentic, genuine, supportive, and caring relationships (Ingram, 2013; O’Leary et al., 2013; Ruch, 2018).

The *Professional Self* requires social workers to be open and transparent about their role and remit when working alongside individuals or families. Being clear about the ‘purpose of our engagement’ with individuals or families (Gardner, 2019), and the legal frameworks that direct the focus of the engagement are important. It is also essential that the support and guidance the social worker can offer within their role but also the limitation to their engagement is explained to. The *Professional Self* also links to the:

‘specific knowledge and expertise we expect students and practitioners to acquire, such as an in-depth understanding of relevant interdisciplinary theory, insight into the legal, ethical and professional frameworks for social work, interpersonal and methodological skills to engage with the people they will be supporting, and self-reflective skills to critically examine how best they can fulfil their professional role.’ (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024)

Within the *Professional Self* is also the understanding and compliance with professional standards held by regulatory bodies such as Social Work England, and professional codes of conduct. As well as an awareness of societal expectations around what constitutes professional social work practice.

The *Personal Self* links to the *use of self*, which is very much discussed in contemporary social work practice (Ruch et al., 2010). If relationships are the most critical resource that a social worker has, these need to be authentic and genuine (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). Therefore, the *use of self* and an understanding of how this manifests itself in the direct work is key to the development of authentic relationships based on positive, anti-oppressive social work practice. Within this element of the framework, social workers need to reflect and consider what aspects of themselves are they willing to share; alongside what is appropriate given the purpose of the relationship. This includes their ‘own values, life experiences, interests, and personal qualities’ that if brought into their practice ‘can increase the quality of support and deepen the human-to-human relationships at the heart of social work practice.’ (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024, p. 5). From a social pedagogical perspective, it is acknowledged that there is no professional without being able to be personal within relationship-based social work (Charfe & Gardner, 2019).

The third element is that of the *Private Self*. For effective relationship-based practice, there must be a clear understanding of the boundary between the *personal* and *private*. Social workers need to be able to work out the aspects of their *private* life that they should not share with the people they are working alongside. Again, this is very individually determined and linked to experience, skills, and roles. Social workers need a high level of self-awareness and reflexivity to be able to manage this boundary (Gardner, 2019). As a rule of thumb, any experience that has not been fully processed and feels too emotionally raw should not be shared as it will ‘likely cloud the worker’s professional judgment,

have an adverse impact on the person they support or negatively affect their relationship.’ (Charfe, 2025). However, a social worker can still draw on these private experiences and emotions to assist them in having empathic understanding (Mührel, 2008, cited in Charfe, 2025). This will demonstrate itself in their behavior and body language and not in the spoken words they choose to use and demonstrates the value of empathy being alive in their practice (Charfe & Gardner, 2019).

Social work: the paradoxical situation of being powerful, feeling powerless, and an expectation to empower

Using Foucault’s (2002) theory on power is valuable in critically analyzing its place within relationship-based practice. The academic discussion and critical exploration of power are varied and contrasting (Karim, 2023) and there is not enough space for a detailed discussion here. Unlike other postmodern theorist such as Lukes (2005), ‘Foucault (1982) regards power as relational and fluid in its manifestation, rather than something which is possessed and exercised’ (Karim, 2023, p. 1062). Foucault’s theoretical approach lends itself to the focus of the centrality of relationships and the exploration of power within these using the social pedagogical 3 Ps framework. Foucault (2002) maintains that power is a core element of all human relationships and that it is present in all relationships no matter a person’s position within a social structure (Gilbert & Powell, 2010; Taylor, 2014). If power, as Foucault (2002) states, is ever present, it is imperative that it is explored and understood with regard to relationship-based social work practice. This awareness of power dynamics within relationship-based practice aligns with the ethical principles of social justice, rights, anti-oppressive practice, and empowerment that underpin social work practice (O’Leary et al., 2013), as well as with social work approaches such as, strengths-based and person-centered practice. The author therefore believes that it is advantageous for social workers and students to be given space and time to reflect and understand how power works within these relationship-based approaches. It is also useful to have the ability to identify the relevant power bases they navigate within their everyday practice. This knowledge can assist them to meet but also enshrine into their direct work the national and international professional standards held by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2018) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014). Social workers sit within a paradoxical situation where they find themselves equally powerful and powerless in systems that often cause moral distress and burn out (Weinberg, 2009). This also relates to the term *moral injury* (Williamson et al., 2021, p. 453), where there is a ‘strong cognitive and emotional response that can occur following events that violate a person’s moral or ethical code’. It is this conflict to a person’s deeply held beliefs and values that can cause the distress and feelings of powerlessness. This is also set against the paradoxical situations and expectations placed on social workers to promote and support the empowerment of disadvantaged and marginalized people and social groups.

Powerful: By nature of the legislative aspect directing and framing social work practice, social workers have a high level of legal power. This gives them a legal mandate and duty to make decisions that could and often do have an effect on nearly every aspect of an individual’s or family’s life. As Gilbert and Powell (2010) state the social work practice of

assessment, risk management and care planning leads to high levels of surveillance and power. A lack of legal and ethical literacy around this legislative and practice power can lead to oppressive and inhuman practice even if carried out unintentionally (Tedam, 2021). Due to the complex nature and uncertainty of social work, there are often no clear or defined answers or solutions to addressing these complexities within the direct work undertaken by social workers (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024). This can lead to what Featherstone and Gupta (2018) highlight as *ethical trespass*. Coined by the Canadian social work researcher Weinberg (2009), *ethical trespass* is, an important concept or social workers to be aware of, especially in relation to power. This concept relates to ‘the harmful effects that inevitably follow not from our intentions but from our participation in social systems and processes’ (Featherstone & Gupta, 2020, p. 837). Therefore, the need for awareness of the likelihood of *ethical trespass* means that as practitioners, social workers have to be able to confront and reflect on their positions and the power that is afforded to them. A critical understanding of the role but also, the power held within the law, in promoting human rights and social justice is therefore essential (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2016).

Powerless: A major paradox within social work practice is that even with the weight of legal power behind them, social workers can regularly feel quite powerless within social work systems. As the famous quote (attributed to both Spider-Man and the French Revolution) states *with great power comes great responsibility*. Yet it is this weight of responsibility and a desire to ‘do the right thing’ and work in anti-oppressive ways that can often lead to a moral and ethical collision with systems and procedures that enforce the states powers and social control (Pawar, 2019), sometimes resulting in moral distress (Weinberg, 2009) and burn out. Given the contextual and ethical dimensions surrounding the everyday decisions social workers make, many consistently ask themselves *how do we know we are doing the right thing?* As Evan (2016) rightly highlights, poorly designed, oppressive systems and processes will always overshadow any well-meaning and ethically based practice. A clear example of this paradoxical situation can be seen in a recent example explained to the author. As a team leader responsible for a large team of social workers, this particular individual was voicing feelings of powerlessness in the fact that, though they had the power to remove children from their families, they did not have the power to top up a travel card for a family. This decision had to be agreed and permission granted by a service manager, two positions above them, leading to feelings of powerlessness and frustration on a daily basis, hampering quick responses to families and negatively impacting on their relationship.

Empowerment: A key misconception around empowerment is that social workers create and produce it. The author has often heard social workers and students say that they empowered the person they are working with. True empowerment is not something *given to* but rather something that is developed within an individual. Empowerment happens when an individual can make sense of the world around them, has the power to make decisions, and experiences a greater sense of agency in all or key aspects of their life (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). A social worker’s role in the empowerment of people, as Krumer-Nevo (2016, p. 1802) states, happens ‘when social workers take a stance and behave as partners of their service users in their struggle’. This partnership helps build the self-efficacy and self-confidence needed for a person to become empowered (Freire, 1998/2001). To work as true partners within an equitable relationship ‘requires an

awareness and understanding of power dynamics and how they operate in relation to discrimination and oppression on structural, systemic and personal levels as well as the intersectionality of discrimination' (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024). An understanding of the intersectionality of discrimination and the part power plays in this is important. As Tedom (2021) writes, people's identities are complex and have a diverse range of social categories woven within them, such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, and age. The power or lack of power within these social categories and their intersectionality can lead to discrimination and oppression, but conversely also grants the power to oppress. As she rightly states, it's therefore imperative that social workers have the ability to understand the intersectionality of discrimination and the impact of this when working anti-oppressively (Tedom, 2021).

Social work and social pedagogy perspectives on power

Foucault (2002) argued that certain groups or socioeconomic classes within society do not hold all the power that in fact 'power circulates via a myriad of social networks penetrating deep into the far corners of social life playing out its effects through the everyday interactions of autonomous individuals' (Gilbert & Powell, 2010, p. 6). As Ferguson (2011; Ferguson et al., 2022, p. 210) states, this understanding of power assists social workers to practice 'critically in ethical ways that take account of power relations and structural inequalities, using 'good authority'.

A core ethical principle of social pedagogical theory and practice is the ability for social workers to work in partnership and alongside the people they support, building equitable relationships (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024; Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). As Petrie (2020, p. 4) states, social pedagogy demands that we work 'alongside' people as a supportive, egalitarian presence'. However, this can be challenging and complex when faced with safeguarding, statutory duties, and legislation that gives social workers power over making decisions in people's lives. Therefore, a critical understanding of the bases of power assists in anti-oppressive, ethical practice where social workers are able to use 'good authority' (Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson et al., 2022, p. 210).

The 3 Ps framework sits alongside other concepts and methods of understanding and navigating power in social work. These include the four aspects of power developed by Thompson (2006), the matrix of power relations created by Tew (2006), and more recently, the 4D2P framework created by Tedom (2021) and the Power Informed Practice framework by Karim (2023). In contrast, the 3 Ps framework (Jappe, 2010) concentrates on the boundaries between the *professional*, *personal*, and *private* within relationship-based practice of a social pedagogue, social workers, or students. The 3 Ps framework has been further expanded (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024) to support social workers and students to critically reflect on power and their positionality (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019) within the relationships they are forming with the people they work alongside. This not only relates to the people they are providing support to, and their families, but also colleagues and other professionals in recognition of the multi-agency element of contemporary social work practice. Unlike the frameworks mentioned above, the 3 Ps, framework is underpinned by standpoint theory (Hall, 2020), requiring students and social workers to explore and develop a deeper and more distinctively personal understanding of how their own social and

political experiences have shaped their view and use of power. The framework facilitates more reflexive thinking, which England (1994, p. 244) describes as ‘self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self’.

An important aspect in the critical exploration of power is firstly an understanding of the types of powers that are at play in our direct relationships with each other. These types of power come from an individual’s perception of what power (or lack of power) they hold and can be seen in three categories:

dependent, independent, and interdependent (or collective) power. Dependent power is based on formal roles or influence over others, which, while sometimes necessary for protection or guidance, can be easily misused and become oppressive. Independent power arises from within the individual, grounded in self-confidence, skills, and self-worth—enabling people to act autonomously without relying on external validation. Interdependent power, on the other hand, emphasizes the collective nature of human relationships, where cooperation, solidarity, and mutual support build shared strength—described as ‘power with’ rather than ‘power over.’ (Reitz & Higgins, 2021, p. 271). Recognising these types of power encourages social workers and students to move beyond control-based models of practice toward more ethical, empowering, and relational practices.

The ability to work anti-oppressively is to be keenly aware of where power is operating from and in what manner (Tedam, 2021). The author believes that the classic study by social psychologists French and Raven (1959) offers a useful framework to critically analyze power dynamics inherent in relationships. The work of French and Raven (1959) is still seen as a seminal text in the study of power and, in relation to the focus of this article, assists in the understanding of where power can originate from; an important aspect when considering the three domains within the 3 Ps framework.

To summarize their work, French and Raven (1959) identified five bases of power—legitimate, reward, referent (personal), expert, and coercive. Legitimate power stems from formal authority, though it is limited by others’ acceptance of that authority and can be resisted, as seen when individuals disengage from social workers. Reward power is dependent on individuals valuing the incentives offered, an example of which could be seen as regaining access to children through compliance with a child protection plan. While coercive power, based on fear or punishment, can lead to resistance and false cooperation. Personal or referent power is rooted in personality and relational skills and is crucial for anti-oppressive, empowering practices. Expert power comes from knowledge and qualifications, emphasized in social work through ongoing professional development and co-production with service users.

If we require social workers to practice ethically and use their power ‘with’ rather than ‘over’, there must be the strengthening of critical reflection and understanding around the types and bases of power within relationship-based practice. An awareness that the dynamics within relationship-based practice also has an influence on the different power bases, especially when considering statutory requirements and safeguarding responsibilities. It is therefore helpful, the author argues, to have a practical framework to assist social workers and students in reflecting on these.

Using the 3 Ps to explore power in relationship-based practice

In developing the 3 Ps framework further, we have not only focused on the boundaries within a relationship but importantly the power dynamics within these. This expansion of the 3 Ps assists social workers and students to become more aware of the power dynamics and structures contained in their relationship-based practice. This awareness helps them to consider how to challenge negative power while also understanding how to use power as ‘good authority’ (Ferguson et al., 2022, p. 210) when developing ethical and anti-oppressive practice. They can question in whose name and best interests they are using the power and authority that they have, as well as identifying the types and bases of power. Using the 3 Ps supports practitioners to identify power structures but also the power they have within their professional relationships. It aids critical self-reflection on their understanding of ethical practice. Based on a human rights perspective and supporting the development of anti-oppressive practice grounded in social justice (IFSW, 2014), the framework can assist social work practitioners and students to consider how they are going to manage the complexity of practice and the power and powerlessness they will face.

The model explained

Approach to social work

In the top row is the title Approach to Social Work. Here social workers are asked to reflect on their attitude and beliefs with regard to the *purpose* of their *Professional* role and work. This critical self-reflection will assist a social worker to understand how their beliefs shape the manner in which they approach their work. From a social pedagogical orientation, and an anti-oppressive stance, social work is based on human rights, social justice, collaboration, and partnership working. This partnership working not only relates to other professionals but importantly with the individuals/families they are working alongside. Having a high level of legal and ethical literacy is vital in informing the understanding of the power a social work has and how this power can be used to build equitable relationships and promote positive life changes and increase well-being for the person/people being supported. As discussed above, social workers can be incredibly powerful and have high levels of formal power. It is therefore apposite that they critically reflect and ‘examine how they conduct themselves when they hold greater power and how they can exercise their power without making the other person feel humiliated or at their mercy.’ (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024, p. 9). This links clearly to the *Personal* element of the 3 Ps. A willingness and ability to genuinely work collaboratively and alongside the individual and understand why this is fundamental to relationship-based and anti-oppressive practice. Using the *Private* to again reflect and check that they are not pushing forward their own ideas or agenda or believing that they know what is best in response to the situation and needs of the person they are supporting (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024).

It is also important to acknowledge within this element the powerlessness social workers can feel, and the narrow perspective often attributed to power; seeing it ‘as a zero-sum game, in which one party only has power when the other party doesn’t, gaining power requires taking someone else’s power, and the only way to share power is by giving it up.’ (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024, p. 9). The impact of this can be that an

individual social worker can try and hold on to the limited power they feel they have, thus having a negative impact on their ability to build an equitable relationship. Having a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which power operates can shape power 'as a generative force that can spread in the same way that a candle's flame can light another candle without getting extinguished.' (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024, p. 9).

A case illustration of this was experienced by the author during a tutorial with a student. The student was working as a social worker within an Adult Social Care team and was due to hold a statutory review meeting to re-assess a care package for a woman who had been assessed to be in the latter middle stages of dementia. According to staff in the care setting and the previous social worker, this woman had been assessed as lacking capacity. With what was perceived as limited communication, she was therefore not going to be present at the meeting. During the tutorial, the student asked how they could use a more social pedagogical approach to working with this woman. We discussed the student's standpoint and how they viewed their professional role. It became very apparent that they felt levels of ethical trespass (Featherstone & Gupta, 2018) and wanted to be more person-centered as well as upholding this woman's human rights. As a result, the student decided, much to the dismay of the other professionals and care staff, that the woman needed to be present, as decisions made in this meeting would have a direct impact on her life. The student believed and understood that the other professionals involved felt pushed for time and that this meeting would now be much longer and less straightforward. The woman attended the meeting and the student worked hard with care and compassion to find ways that the woman could communicate her wishes to them with regard to the key decisions being made. That she was able to understand these, allowing the student to gain more detailed understanding of what mattered to her. She thanked the student at the end, and this was the start of the student building a stronger relationship with her based on respect and decisions made with 'good authority'. As well as the student working in an anti-oppressive way that was an important aspect to what they saw as a key purpose of their work.

Needs

In the second row, the focus is very much on reflecting on *needs*, requiring social workers to ask *whose needs are being met?* Within the *Professional* element, there will be legal and organizational expectations and requirements placed on the social worker, such as assessment and legal timescales, organizational aims, and remits (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024). Being open and transparent about these are important. Taking a relationship-based and anti-oppressive approach (Tadam, 2021) to practice, using a person-centered way of working, means that the needs of the individual being supported will be the guiding focus. Social workers need to be able to reflect and have an awareness of their own needs in relation to the work which falls within the *Personal* element of the framework. How does a social worker marry the needs and person-centered way of working with the needs they have to meet the statutory and organizational requirements they have placed on them? This requires a high level of openness and transparency and the skills to build a supportive relationship with clear boundaries where each person is aware of their role and position within the relationship. One where there is an equitable balance of each other's needs (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024).

Using the *Private* element of the framework will assist the social worker to make sure that they are not pursuing their own needs. This is not always done in a malicious or controlling way, but out of a desire to help or assist people. A clear case illustration of this was explained to the author during a tutorial with a social work student. The student was halfway through their final placement and was explaining what work they had been involved with. They described spending 3 hours with a street sex worker where together they had developed a clear plan of what support and various actions the sex worker would take over the coming weeks. The student then explained their feelings of annoyance when the sex worker left the written plan on the table when they left the building, leaving the student feeling they had wasted their time. When I asked the student to consider who the plan was for, they reflected that in fact the plan had been more for them. They acknowledged that this was very much linked to their need to feel like they were doing things that were worthwhile and supporting people to make positive changes. After further discussion, the student realized that in fact, they had not wasted their time and that the sex worker had spent some valuable time with the student, who had clearly showed that they cared about them and their situation. This assisted the student to carry on developing a relationship with the sex worker, based on care and respect.

Power

The final row of the framework has a specific focus on power. Within this section social workers are prompted to consider the formal power dynamics that are present in their *Professional* role and their own understanding and practice of this formal power. This column asks that they consider the power base and types of power at play within their work (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024). Linking back to human right based and anti-oppressive approach to practice, the social worker must consider legal, policy, and organizational procedures that can be used to support their *Professional* practice. Aiding them to work in partnership, supporting individuals and families to become empowered and using advocacy skills as a professional method to their work (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024).

Within the *Personal*, social workers need to be critically aware of the informal power they may bring and how they use these to develop positive relationship-based practice based on anti-oppressive and human rights. Critical self-reflection as well as role modeling is required here as well as being able to work alongside (Petrie, 2020) and in partnership, whilst also being open to showing our flaws and limits to our knowledge and abilities (Charfe & Eichsteller, 2024). Being able to sit comfortably with the fact that as social workers we do not have the solutions or answers to every problem. Sometimes the most important thing a social worker can do is be present, listen, and offer recognition to the person they are working alongside.

This then links to the *Private* element and the ability to become aware of any unconscious or uncritical use of power and privilege. Research by Fuchs et al. (2019) shows the importance of being critically aware of what they term *Advantage Blindness*. Being aware and understanding the bias that we hold but also the advantages and privileges that have assisted us in getting to the professional positions we hold. As they state 'Our research finds the idea of being advantaged to be uncomfortable for many senior leaders' (Fuchs et al., 2019). Even though their research relates to business leaders

the theory is beneficial as within the field of social work it can also be difficult to face and accept the privileges we may have. As with *Needs*, this lack of awareness or acceptance does not always come from a desire to misuse the power advantage gives us. A perfect case illustration of this comes from the author and their work as part of a co-produced project with a group of care experienced young people. Wanting to make the first on-line meeting with this group, interesting and engaging, the author used several on-line platforms and digital tools in planning the rough outline of the meeting. As the young people joined, the author realized that the majority were using their mobile phones, making it difficult for them to access the digital tools easily or at all. The author realized that she had not considered the advantages she had, such as good internet access and an up-to-date laptop all provided by the university she works at. This was not the same for the young people and so the session had to be quickly altered. Subsequently, the author reflected on the advantages she had and made sure that future sessions were equitable and not about her own needs. Thus, highlighting the importance of critical self-reflection and reflexivity within relationship-based practice.

Conclusion

To conclude, in acknowledgment of the importance of anti-oppressive and relationship-based practice, the power dynamics within these relationships is a critical aspect that needs to be explored and understood. Within formal educational settings and training courses where students and social workers are being taught about relationship-based practice, the reality of power needs to be covered in some detail. The author developed and has used the 3 Ps framework to aid teaching and create space to critically reflect and explore the issue of power, needs, and approach to social work with regard to relationship-based practice. The framework offers prompts in the *professional*, *personal*, and *private* domain, to aid individuals to reflect and consider their own relationship-based practice. The 3 Ps framework can be utilized as an aid, alongside other frameworks, by lectures and trainers as a teaching tool. A critical awareness of the types and bases of power can assist social workers and students to be more critically self-aware of how power operates within their everyday work. An understanding of the situational dynamics that can influence a base of power is important in raising awareness and limiting the negative impacts of these. Set against the complexity and uncertainty of the everyday direct work undertaken by social workers, the application of the 3 Ps framework can assist in developing this awareness and understanding, it can facilitate the use of power to work in more equitable and anti-oppressive ways using 'good authority' (Ferguson, et al. 2022). The author is also aware that there needs to be further evaluation of the effectiveness of the 3 Ps framework and that future research is required to assist in increasing the robustness of the framework. However, the author believes that the use of the Danish social pedagogical concept of the 3 Ps can support social workers and students to develop anti-oppressive practice, by assisting them to critically explore, reflect, and address the differing aspects of power at play when working with individuals and families.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Braye, S., & Preston-Shoot, M. (2016). *Practicing social work law*. Palgrave.
- British Association of Social Workers. (2018). *Professional capabilities framework social worker*. The British Association of Social Workers.
- British Association of Social Workers. (2021). *Code of ethics*. Code of ethics | BASW. Retrieved August 21, 2024
- Cameron, C., & Moss, P. (2011). Social pedagogy: Current understandings and opportunities. In C. Cameron & P. Moss (Eds.), *Social pedagogy and working with young people: Where care and education meets* (pp. 1–20). Jessica Kingsley.
- Charfe, L. (2025). I've Got the Power! A social pedagogical exploration of power dynamics in relational leadership and practice within public services. In R. Wilson, H. Hesselgreaves, M. French, D. Jamieson, M. Hawkins, M. King, & J. Kimmitt (Eds.), *Futures in Public Management: The emerging Relational approach to public services*. Emerald Publishing.
- Charfe, L., & Eichsteller, G. (2024). Making sense of power and politics in everyday practice through the 3 Ps. In R. Baikady (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Power, Politics and Social Work*. Oxford University Press.
- Charfe, L., & Gardner, A. (2019). *Social pedagogy and social work*. SAGE.
- Eichsteller, G., & Holthoff, S. (2011). Conceptual foundations of social pedagogy: A transnational perspective from Germany. In C. Cameron & P. Moss (Eds.), *Social pedagogy and working with children and young people* (pp. 21–40). Jessica Kingsley Publication.
- England, K. (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *Professional Geographer*, 46(1), 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0033-0124.1994.00080.x>
- Evan, K. (2016). Public service markets aren't working for the public good . . . or as markets. In C. Pell, R. Wilson, & T. Lowe (Eds.), *Kittens are evil: Little heresies in public policy* (pp. 1–10). Triarchy Press.
- Featherstone, B., & Gupta, A. (2018). *Protecting children: A social model*. Policy Press.
- Featherstone, B., & Gupta, A. (2020). Social workers' reflections on ethics in relation to adoption in the UK: Everywhere but nowhere? *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(3), 833–849. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz033>
- Ferguson, H. (2011). *Child protection practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Disney, T., Leigh, J., Cooner, T. S., & Beddoe, L. (2022). Relationship-based practice and the creation of therapeutic change in long-term work: Social work as a holding relationship. *Social Work Education*, 41(2), 209–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1837105>
- Foucault. (2002). *Power: Essential works of Foucault 1954–1984*. Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>
- Freire, P. (with Macedo, D). (2001). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy and civic courage*. Rowman and Littlefield. Original work published 1998
- French, J., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150–167). Institute for Social Research.
- Fuchs, B., Reitz, M., & Higgins, J. (2019). Do you have advantage blindness? *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved August 22, 2024.
- Gardner, A. (2019). *Social pedagogy concepts*. In Author's Own.
- Gilbert, T., & Powell, J. L. (2010). Power and social work in the United Kingdom: A Foucauldian excursion. *Journal of Social Work*, 10(1), 3–22. 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017309347237>

- Hall, J. N. (2020). The other side of inequality: Using standpoint theories to examine the privilege of the evaluation profession and individual evaluators. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 41(1), 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214019828485>
- Hem, M., & Heggen, K. (2003). Being professional and being human: One nurse's relationship with a psychiatric patient. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 43(1), 101–108.
- Ingram, R. (2013). Locating emotional intelligence at the heart of social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(5), 987–1004. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcs029>
- Ingram, R., & Smith, M. (2018). *Relationship-based practice: Emergent themes in social work literature (insight 41)*. IRISS.
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2014). *Global definition of social work*. Retrieved May 19, 2025, from <https://www.ifsw.org/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- Jacobson, D., & Mustafa, N. (2019). Social identity map: A reflexivity tool for practicing explicit positionality in critical qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919870075>
- Jappe, E. (2010). *Håndbog for pædagogstuderende*. Frydenlund.
- Jensen, J. J. (2011). Understandings of Danish pedagogical practice. In C. Cameron & P. Moss (Eds.), *Social pedagogy and working with young people: Where care and education meets* (pp. 1–20). Jessica Kingsley.
- Karim, S. (2023). Power-informed practice in social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 23(6), 1062–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173231180307> (Original work published 2023).
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2016). Poverty-aware social work: A paradigm for social work practice with people in poverty: Table 1. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(6), 1793–1808. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv118>
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- McAlister, J. (2022). *Independent review of children's social care: Final report*. Department for Education. Retrieved May 19, 2025, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report>
- Monteux, S., & Monteux, A. (2020). Human encounters: The core of everyday care practice. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 9(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2020.v9.x.015>
- Mühlrel, E. (2008). *Verstehen und Achten. Philosophische Reflexionen zur professionellen Haltung in der Sozialen Arbeit*. Die Blaue Eule.
- O'Leary, P., Tsui, M. S., & Ruch, G. (2013). The boundaries of the social work relationship revisited: Towards a connected, inclusive and dynamic conceptualisation. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(1), 135–153. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr181>
- Pawar, M. (2019). Social work and social policy practice: Imperatives for political engagement. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 1(1), 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516602619833219>
- Petrie, P. (2020). Taking social pedagogy forward: Its fit with official UK statements on promoting wellbeing. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2020.v9.x.017>
- The Promise. (2020). *Workforce*. [keepthepromise-workforce.pdf](https://www.promise-workforce.pdf).
- Reitz, M., & Higgins, J. (2021). Speaking truth to power: Why leaders cannot hear what they need to hear. *The British Medical Journal*, 5(4), 270–273. <https://doi.org/10.1136/leader-2020-000394>
- Robinson, I. (2024). *What we mean by relationship-centred practice - relationships project*. Retrieved August 26, 2024
- Rothuizen, J. J., & Harbo, L. J. (2017). Social pedagogy: An approach without fixed recipes. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 6(1), 6–28. 6. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2017.v6.1.002>
- Ruch, G. (2005). Relationship-based practice and reflective practice: Holistic approaches to contemporary child care social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 10(2), 111–123. 7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2005.00359.x>

- Ruch, G. (2018). The contemporary context of relationship-based practice. In G. Ruch, D. Turney, & A. Ward (Eds.), *Relationship-based social work: Getting to the heart of practice* (pp. 19–36). Jessica Kingsley.
- Ruch, G., Turney, D., & Ward, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Relationship-based social work*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Sudbery, J., & Whittaker, A. (2018). *Human growth and development: An introduction for social workers*. Routledge.
- Taylor, D. (2014). *Michel Foucault: Key concepts*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Tedam, P. (2021). *Anti-oppressive social work practice*. Learning Matters.
- Tew, J. (2006). Understanding power and powerlessness: Towards a framework for emancipatory practice in social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 6(1), 33–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017306062222> (Original work published 2006).
- Thompson, N. (2006). Anti-discriminatory practice. *British Journal of Social Work* 36(6), 1061–1062. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl092>
- Trevithick, P. (2014). Humanising managerialism: Reclaiming emotional reasoning, intuition, the relationship, and knowledge and skills in social work. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 28(3), 287–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2014.926868>
- Weinberg, M. (2009). Moral distress: A missing but relevant concept for ethics in social work. *Canadian Social Work Review/Revue Canadienne de Service Social*, 26(2), 139–151.
- Williamson, V., Murphy, D., Phelps, A., Forbes, D., & Greenberg, N. (2021). Moral injury: The effect on mental health and implications for treatment. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 8(6), 453–455. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(21\)00113-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00113-9)