Social Work in 40 Objects

professional identity through objects and story-telling

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With grateful thanks to all who generously joined in the
Social Work in 40 Objects project

Social Work Practice Education Conference
Sheffield Hallam University April 2018
Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

IFSW/IASSW (2014)
obsolescence

*the process of becoming obsolete; falling into disuse or becoming out of date*
or:

order

the arrangement or disposition of people or things in relation to each other according to a particular sequence, pattern or method.
In his campaign to abolish slavery and the slave trade, Thomas Clarkson noticed that artefacts could influence public opinion more than words alone.
making connections via objects

descriptive narrative


forging an identity

Fintan O’Toole, *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (2013), Dublin: Royal Irish Academy
understanding emotional connections via objects

*Objects that are evocative*


“We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.”

Objects are “companions to our emotional lives, a provocation to thought.”

“Most objects exert their holding power because of the particular moment and circumstance in which they come into [our] lives.”
“Artefacts, objects and paraphernalia and their relationship to social work practice and identity have attracted little attention in social work despite their ubiquity in all aspects of our lives.”

social work’s *chest of objects*

in the face of widespread public ignorance of social work, could *a chest of Objects* increase awareness?

could such *a chest of Objects* help students develop their professional identity?

might we all understand social work better by letting go of dusty definitions and wordy textbooks to find more direct truths through a collection of Objects?
social work’s *chest of objects*

... and what might such a collection of Objects look like?
Jan - July 2016

127 people responded from 24 countries

| Australia | Ireland | Réunion |
| Canada | Italy | Romania |
| Croatia | Lithuania | Russia |
| France | Malaysia | Slovenia |
| Georgia | Moldova | South Africa |
| Germany | Netherlands | Spain |
| Ghana | New Zealand | UK |
| India | Nigeria | US |
what is an Object?
making transformative connections via objects

let’s meet eight people who proposed an Object

briefly hear their stories and why they proposed their Objects

and tease out some themes from their stories
I am looking for (longing for) social workers who can deliver the type of personalised services that I need and that others who use social work also need.
People like me, people who use social work - we are the ‘real-life reference library’.

Together we can develop personalised services, ones where we appreciate each other’s passion, knowledge and commitment.
how do social workers get their *knowledge*?

experts by experience
Managing childcare and protection issues as a social worker and balancing this with my own parenting was always complicated, invariably involving guilt - ‘mum’ space in my head being used to think about child care cases when I was at home being a mum.
This model of *Postman Pat* was made by son when he was 5 years old. ‘Patrick’ came to work with me and has been a permanent feature on my social work desk for about 30 years.

He’s a constant reminder that, though social work can never be a 9-5 job, ‘my own boys’ always had priority.
the private and the public

self-care and burn-out
I grew up in a small village in Nigeria. Social services is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria – the traditional rulers provide social welfare services through the elders and family heads.

The kinship system provides for child and family welfare, mental health, and care for aged.
As a young boy, I loved the Traditional bead *(ileke ibile)* worn by the village leaders. The leaders meet the social needs of the villagers and deal with problematic behaviours and find solutions.

I see social workers as ‘wearing’ the *Traditional bead*. It cannot be physically observed – but the social work profession *is* the Traditional bead.
where does social work’s *authority* come from?

social
(spiritual?) leadership
vadim moldovan
professor, usa

“I wandered into social work after leaving the Soviet Union for the US and driving a New York cab.

My main focus now is professionalization of social work in Moldova and post-socialist countries.”
When Tolstoy met Jane Addams she was wearing a coat whose sleeves had “enough material in one arm to dress a girl”. Did she not find such dress “a barrier to the people”? These sleeves represent the potential for hypocrisy for social workers.
one foot
in the establishment
and the other
amongst the poor
I’ve served my people working in different non-profit organisations in South Africa.

I was inspired by my late sister and my living mother’s altruistic causes in the community I grew up in.
Throughout my social work career I have worked with people living in abject poverty and the direst need is a basic commodity: food.

I decided to own my country’s poverty and do something about it. Social work is about owning the community’s problems and doing something about them.
what is it to be *professional*

**engagement**
- closeness / distance
I am a social worker and a percussionist and at my happiest when combining the two.

I was born and bred in Nottingham, where my family was exposed to complex issues of race, poverty and disability. I grew up steeped in traditions of Indian music.
Through drums I facilitate a process where social justice, music, performance and the well-being of people intermingle. The drum has come with me every step of the way. I have drummed my way into the heart of social work practice. It has allowed me to retain a creative practice in the teeth of the harsh realities of austerity and bureaucracy.

“
what do social workers do and how do they do it creatively?

tools of the trade – sharing creative practices
I came to social work not very much knowing what it is, but feeling that it is my field. I was immediately caught deeply by its main meaning – to take care of vulnerable groups of people, to stand for their rights, to empower them to change their life situations,
A candle is a symbol of hope and light. Social workers bring light into the dark times in people’s lives to help them see the possibilities.

Social work lightens not just the outer world but the inner world too. Social workers provide a candle to others to lighten their lives.“
utopianism - clear-eyed idealist and firm-footed realist

idealism and realism
- hope and belief
I began my working life as a nurse. After a diversion by way of managing a music shop, I coordinated home care in a London borough.

I’ve had a varied career - a hospital social worker, a mental health worker, an HIV social worker. Now I work with disabled prisoners.
a dalek is a powerful science fiction alien that exterminates all it sees – but it can’t climb stairs!

A dalek exemplifies the Social Model of Disability:

*Get the environment right and it minimises the problems.*

Most prisons aren’t adapted for disabled people.

The dalek also symbolises the frustrations of the job - of working with people who don’t agree with disabled prisoners “getting special treatment”.

“...
dystopianism; professional power, its risks and dangers

professional power - it can be used for ill
library of real-life; postman pat; ileke ibile;
jane addams’ coat; food; drum; candle; dalek
objects from sheffield hallam

mark doel
mind the gap

pete nelson
cue / radical sw

chrissie edmonds
teflon

paul stapleton
pint of beer

anne hollows
grey blanket

janet williams
passport
Creating an object as a group of service users

We found the 40 Objects project really interesting and the concept is motivating and fun – the group I supported to participate really enjoyed it. It was interesting how the Object enabled people to explain what social work meant to them.

“Josephine, Mary, Ruth, Margaret, Nicola
social work on the move
documenting social work
funding social work
communicating social work
gifts and mementoes
natural world
dystopia / utopia
typology of objects

**METAPHORICAL objects** illustrate social work by comparing similar characteristics and making parallels (*candle; dalek; pint; teflon*)

**METAPHYSICAL objects** do not exist as material objects but are construed to illuminate a core element of what social work is or ought to be (*library of real life; mind the gap*)

**PERSONAL objects** from a person’s own history that make a link to their association with social work (*ileke ibile; postman pat*)

**PRACTICAL objects** are used hands-on in direct practice or facilitate direct practice (*drum; passport*)

**SOCIO-POLITICAL objects** illustrate the link between social work and the broader socio-political context (*cue / radical social work book; food; grey blanket*)

**HISTORICAL objects** illustrate social work’s development yet often have a contemporary significance (*jane addams’ coat*)
an inclusive approach to searching for Objects led to a diverse and comprehensive social work narrative

– illustrating the concept of a *contested profession*

an Object is unlikely to speak for itself; the narrator’s explanation is needed (the ‘plaque’ at its side)

– illustrating the concept of *contextualisation*

the more strongly the Object links the story of the person to the narrative of the profession, the more *charged* it becomes

– illustrating the concept of *personalisation*
some conclusions

the project suggests that **public awareness** of social work could be improved through a ‘chest of Objects’

there is some evidence that service users can use Objects to express what social work means to them; **Object work** might be worthy of further development as a method of practice

objects can make abstract concepts more concrete and could **help students** to develop their professional identity

Time, then, to **show and tell**!


O’Toole, F. (2013) A History of Ireland in 100 Objects, Dublin: Royal Irish Acad.


Object 42
visit socialworkin40objects.com
you can propose your own Object by contacting me at: doel@waitrose.com

Social Work in 42 Objects (and more), can be purchased for £10 via the website. All profits go to TARA Children’s Centre, Delhi, to support work with street children.
social work ahead