

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*

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social work

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falling into disuse or becoming out of date*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:





or:

order

the arrangement or disposition of people or things in relation to each other according to a particular sequence, pattern or method.



objects used for public awareness



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

Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*
(2012), London: BBC/British Museum/Penguin

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

Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things we think with*
(2011), Boston: MIT Press

“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.”



paraphernalia of everyday social work

“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.”

Helen Scholar, (2016), ‘The neglected paraphernalia of practice? Objects and arefacts in social work identity, practice and research’ *Qualitative Social Work*, 16(5), 631-648.

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?

the project

socialworkin40objects.com

Jan - July 2016

127 people responded from 24 countries

Australia

Canada

Croatia

France

Georgia

Germany

Ghana

India

Ireland

Italy

Lithuania

Malaysia

Moldova

Netherlands

New Zealand

Nigeria

Réunion

Romania

Russia

Slovenia

South Africa

Spain

UK

US

what is an
Object?



trees

songs

real-life library

teflon

mind the gap

eyes

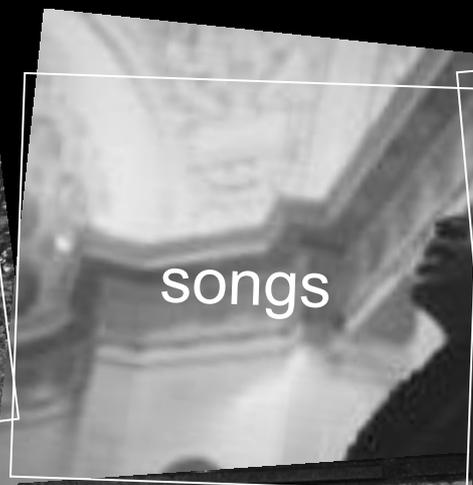
bella the dog

panopticon

escher's
enigma



trees



songs



real-life library



teflon



mind the gap



eyes



bella the dog



panopticon



escher's enigma

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

john dow
service user, scotland



“

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.

”

library of real life



“

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

sheila slesser

lecturer, scotland



“

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. ”

postman pat



“

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

enakele seun david

newly qualified social worker, nigeria



“

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.

”

ileke ibile



“

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 „

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.

”

jane addams' coat



“

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. ”

social work's relationship to the state and established power

one foot
in the establishment
and the other
amongst the poor

duduzile sokhela

social worker and community activist,
south africa



“

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.

”

food



“

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

biant singh suwali

social worker, england



“

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. ”

d r u m



“

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

jorune
vysniauskyte-rimkiene

groupworker, lithuania



“

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;”

candle



“

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

jill palmer

social worker, england



“

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!

d a l e k



“

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



chrisie edmonds



teflon



paul stapleton



pint of beer



anne hollows



grey blanket



janet williams

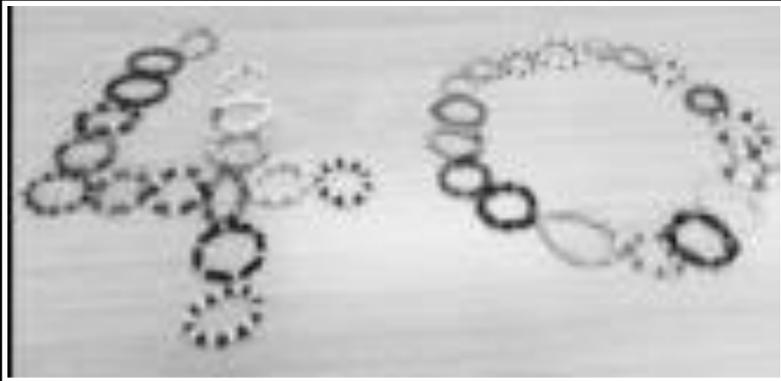


passport



creating an object as a group of service users

jewellery



“

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 IN 42 OBJECTS (and more)

FABRIC OF SOCIAL WORK

- 1 Foundling hospital token
- 2 School bag
 - cushion □ lappieskombers
 - ball of wool □ kete □ khurjini
 - hammock

PLACE AND SPACE

- house □ foundations
 - cardboard box □ labyrinth
 - enigma □ puzzle □ trypillian spiral
 - panopticon □ compass
 - mind the gap
- 3 Outline of a house
 - 4 Patch office door
 - 5 A-Z street finder
 - 6 Real-life library

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

- blackboard □ chandelier
 - juggling balls □ tennis ball □ eyes
 - glasses □ compass (shame)
 - condoms □ hammer
 - box of spanners
- 7 Work bag
 - 8 Memory jar
 - 9 Cue / Radical Social Work
 - 10 Teflon

SOCIAL WORK AT TABLE

- stove □ cheese fondue □ green cup
 - coffee cup □ anchor mug □ tea pot
 - scales □ paper plates
 - paperweight □ pint of beer
 - bottle of coke □ ice lolly
- 11 Tamada
 - 12 Food
 - 13 Chinese bowl
 - 14 Round table

CLOTHING SOCIAL WORK

- 15 Jane Addams' coat
- 16 Court hat
- 17 lleke ibile
- 18 Button
- 19 Grey blanket
 - jeans □ sandals □ shoes □ mitten
 - jewellery



SOUNDS OF SOCIAL WORK

- 20 Mouthpiece
- 21 Drum
 - violin □ guitar □ vinyl □ miserere
 - songs

how to 'exhibit' 127 Objects?

fabric of social work

place and space

tools of the trade

social work at table

clothing social work

sounds of social work

social work on the move
documenting social work

funding social work

communicating social work

gifts and mementoes

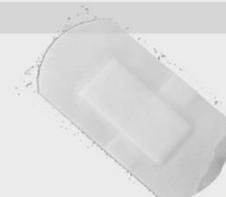
natural world

dystopia / utopia

THE COLLECTIONS

SOCIAL WORK ON THE MOVE

- 22 Traffic sign
- 23 Lego aeroplane
- 24 Car jack, lug wrench
 - bike □ bicycle □ car □ car badge
 - bus □ mobile garden



DOCUMENTING SOCIAL WORK

- magna carta □ hogarth's coram
 - manchester box □ kennedy report
 - cartoon by kal □ whose welfare
 - mental health act
 - care guidelines □ first clare
- 25 Stan and Beveridge
 - 26 School entrance sign
 - 27 Riad's identity card



FUNDING SOCIAL WORK

- 28 Crown coin
- 29 Handful of coins
- 30 Budget

COMMUNICATING SOCIAL WORK

- notebooks □ radio
- computer □ iPod □ baby monitor
- selfie

- 31 Mobile phone

GIFTS AND MEMENTOES

- book stand □ letter opener □ cane
- bard on a brick □ ceramic sculpture
- esculape □ kembang

- 32 Postman Pat
- 33 Crib
- 34 Keys (female and male)

NATURAL WORLD

- 35 Bella
- 36 The Falcon
 - fish net □ trees □ bonsai □ cork



DYSTOPIA / UTOPIA

- 37 Yellow star
- 38 Dalek
- 39 Cross
- 40 Candle
- 41 Hour glass
 - band aid □ insurances
 - walking stick □ pen □ umbrella
 - heart
- 42 Your Object

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*)

learning from *40 Objects*

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** !

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Object 42

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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