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What could be more radical than love?

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What could be more radical than love? The role of love in community work practice.

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Editorial:

When we put out the call for papers for a special issue on love as a component of community work practice, we could not foretell the nature or extent to the likely response. Indeed, the decision to put the call out in the first place was one over which we hesitated, due to the controversial nature of the subject, especially in such hyper-sensitive times (child sexual exploitation scandals in several districts in the UK, for example, having highlighted the tensions in shaping appropriate professional responses to different perceptions of what constitutes 'acceptable' interactions within different communities).

This is not to say that we are fearful of opening up debate about potentially difficult subject matter; indeed, the RCWJ exists specifically for this purpose, providing a safe space in which academics and practitioners can explore and re-define what constitutes 'good' practice in our contested profession. We drew comfort from the fact that the place of love in professional practice is something being explored across the field of human services, with special issues featuring over the past few years in journals concerning the early years, residential care and social pedagogy to name just a few¹.

The response to our call for papers provided reassurance that there is an interest in our profession for opening up a discussion about the role of love – and its counterpoint, anger – in radical community work practice. Most of the articles presented here make reference to Paulo Freire's invocation to infuse community education practice with love; in his own writing, he further characterises this as an 'armed love', which seeks to tackle the most extreme injustices head on, channelling the righteous anger of marginalised and dispossessed groups and individuals.

In the first of these articles, Martin Purcell explores in more detail what we can take from Freire's thoughts on the enactment of a love of humanity, exploring what it means to demonstrate radical love in times he characterises as 'hopeless'; thus building on another of Freire's invocations, to portray hopeful practice in all our dealing with the most marginalised groups and individuals. The findings presented in Purcell's article suggest that there is some grounds for optimism in building on Freire's work, with a sizeable majority of practitioners who responded to his survey indicating that notions of love infuse their everyday practice and reflections.

If we can accept the need for professionally loving forms of practice, then we need to consider how we develop the capabilities of practitioners, both in their initial formation and throughout their professional development, in an area which cannot readily be taught using traditional pedagogical

approaches. In her thought-provoking article, Janet Batsleer reflects on her experience in stimulating 'critical conversations' about uncomfortable subjects with undergraduate students on a youth and community degree. Allowing students – and practitioners – to channel their anger proved just as important as nurturing their capacity to sustain loving relations in practice, and Batsleer draws on a range of sources to inform her reflection on the power of this approach to professional formation.

Building a clearer picture of what loving community work looks like in practice, Erika Laredo explores the provision of professional and voluntary support to a community of sex workers in a 'safe' space in one English city. Here, we are exposed to some of the daily rituals and challenges inherent in working with some of the most marginalised and demonised individuals in society, and are reminded of the importance of the mundane, the personal and the relational aspects of sustaining purposive relationships with those people we seek to nurture and support in their endeavours to effect change in their lives.

Another stigmatised, neglected and overlooked 'community' provides the focus of the next article, in which Lynda Turner & Barry Percy-Smith critique the relational shortcomings evident in the practice of caregiving by local authorities in their role as 'corporate parents' of looked after children. Their writing, drawing on the experience of care experienced individuals, provides evidence of the difficulties faced by professionals committed to infusing their practice with love – something that is shown to be vital with this particularly vulnerable group – when they are curtailed at every turn by the oppressive bureaucracy and (understandably) safety-conscious systems within which they are forced to practice.

As this article in particular demonstrates, the concept of 'love' as an element of practice does not come without its baggage. It is evident throughout these articles that the modern usage of the term, with its emphasis on sexual relations above other more platonic conceptualisations, means that overtly loving forms of practice are likely to come up against considerable scrutiny, and may leave practitioners vulnerable to accusations of malpractice or abuse. In presenting these narratives, we are not advocating for a naïve, ill-considered or neglectful approach to the implementation of loving pedagogical practices; neither do we advocate the disregarding of legitimate concerns about the safety of vulnerable groups and individuals. Instead, we advocate for a form of carefully considered, reflexive practice, informed by our careful reading of the writings of our forebears, infused with a love of humanity, and demonstrating through our commitment to sustaining nurturing relationships with the people we work with, that they are worthy of our love. In so doing, we seek to build with them a sense that radical change in their circumstances is possible, recognising that love on its own is not sufficient to bring about this change, but that love is the way in which we can articulate our commitment to social justice.

The subject is not explored in its entirety in this small selection of articles. While these empirically-based stories demonstrate the possibilities of love as an underpinning principle of radical community work, we remain curious about the challenges inherent in promoting loving forms of practice. For

instance, should we require all community workers to demonstrate their commitment to *professional love*; and – if so – does this automatically preclude individuals for whom relational work is somehow problematic from our profession? How, too, should practitioners seek to overcome their natural disinclination towards certain individuals who they find unlikeable (especially as their unappealing behaviour may have evolved in response to the particular challenging circumstances in which they find themselves, and which the practitioner cannot fully appreciate)? How do practitioners safeguard themselves from the emotional cost of engaging in professionally loving relationships with the people they encounter in their day-to-day work? How do we navigate the complexities of the inherent power differential in relationships between professional and community member, especially when the practitioner is required to enact some form of statutory function with a direct impact on the lives of those with whom they work? Finally (for now), we acknowledge a key limitation in our selection of articles, in that only one of them draws explicitly from practice in the majority world, when there is so much to be learnt from non-Western traditions. These are all aspects which we encourage others to address in their own research and writing, and which our contributors will no doubt return to in future.

ⁱ International Journal of Early Years Education, 26(2): Love, Care & Intimacy in Early Childhood (2018); Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care, 15(3): Love in Professional Practice (2016); International Journal of Social Pedagogy, 5(1): Love in Professional Practice (2016).