

Building Connections: Reflections on Relationship-Based Practice When Working With Refugee Families

Child Protection Social Workers and
Asylum-Seeking Families in Ireland
Issues of Culture, Race, Power
Relations and Mistrust

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Presentation Learning Outcomes

- ▶ Reflect on relationship-based practice in social work within the context of working with individuals seeking international protection.
 - ▶ Share key findings from my research that pertain to relationship-based practices between social workers and families involved in the international protection application process.
 - ▶ Explore various models that can offer insights for reimagining relationship-based practices in the field of social work, particularly in the context of international protection.
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Reflection

- ▶ What does Relation based practice mean to you?
- ▶ What are the factors that could impede the potential for meaningful relationship-based practices when engaging with asylum seekers /those within the international protection application system?



Relationship based Practice in Context

What context ?



Around 1,000 people attended an anti-immigration demonstration in the city centre. Photo: PA Wire/PA Images

Hundreds at 'Refugees Welcome' protest in Dublin to counter anti-asylum demonstrations



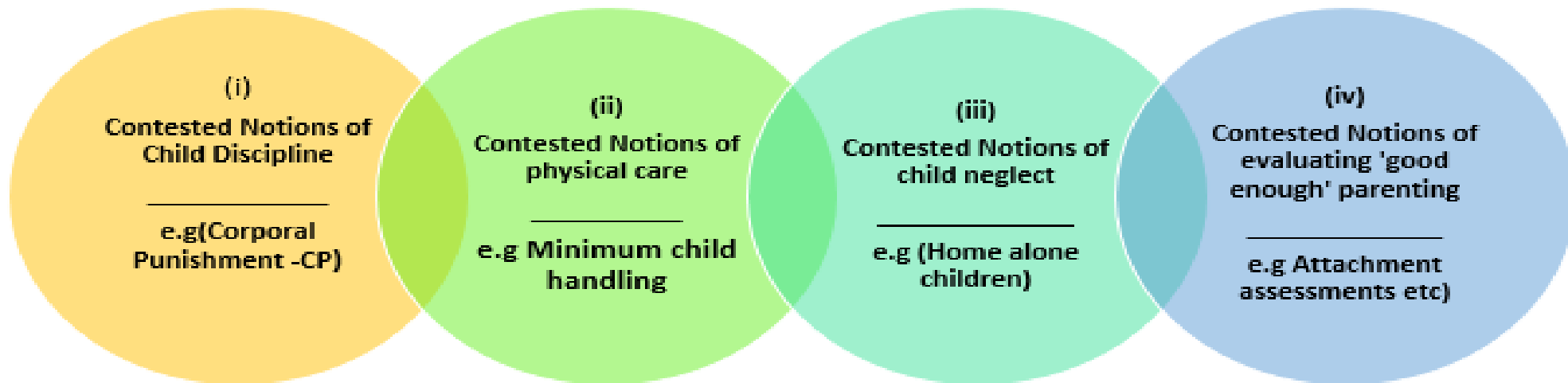
Relationship based practice : Definition

- ▶ The significance of relationships within social work is universally and increasingly acknowledged. Described as 'at the heart of social work' (Trevithick, 2003), a cornerstone (Alexander and Grant, 2009), and 'an absolute precondition' (O'Leary et al., 2013), relationships are considered 'essential rather than incidental' (Alexander and Grant, 2009). Within the caring role, Fewster (2004) suggests that the relationship itself is the intervention. In recent years, the concept of Relationship-Based Practice (RBP) has emerged as a means of articulating the centrality of the relationship between social workers and service users (Ruch, Turney, and Ward, 2010; Hennessey, 2011; Magele, 2015; Bryan et al., 2016). RBP is not merely a method or approach that can be chosen from a menu of alternatives; instead, it is the fundamental core inherent in whatever approach may be adopted across diverse client groups and domains of practice. RBP is the pulsating heart of social work—it resides at its core."

Reflection on some narratives from social workers and asylum seeking parents/



Culture : Narratives of Cross-cultural Child rearing Practices



Child disciplining

Siobhan, a social worker, reflecting on her intervention a family regarding child discipline

The case I was working with was of a teenager from Congo. That child had a severe beating at home. She was a normal teenager who had refused to wash dishes and talked back to her mother. When I visited the centre, her mother told me that it was totally against their culture that the child should answer back to the parent.

Siobhan's narrative continued : The link between precarious immigration status and holding on to own child rearing practice

- I Siobhan's opinion , the child was behaving like a normal teenager. This perspective was not shared by the child's mother who attributed such behaviour to disrespect of parental authority and therefore required correction through corporal punishment.
- In some cases, the precarious immigration status of being an asylum seeker, coupled with fears of possible deportation, caused some parents, like Inyola, to want to hold on to their own cultural parenting styles. In this respect, asylum-seeking parent, Inyola, stated:

Parenting , culture and precarity

- I do not know if I will be deported today or tomorrow or what will happen to me. If I am deported, this is how life is in my country. You have to 'smack' your children to discipline them if they are misbehaving. If I am deported and must go back to my country everyone will think I am not good at disciplining my children. The social worker says that is not how things are done here, but I might not stay here. I might be deported. It all depends on what the Justice Department says. Therefore, I am better to stick to what I know.

In the end Siobhan the social worker concluded

- There are times I have felt that sometimes we take children into care when all that's needed is someone to sit down with these people and explain that they don't have to slap their children or leave them wandering in the centre because it's dangerous, and for Christ's sake give them other ways of disciplining, and monitor the situation. You need time and resources to do that, and social work time simply does not stretch far enough.

Building relationships with families during assessments and challenges in assessing parent/ child bond during an access visit.

Parent: This is another thing the social worker used to tell me, that I do not tell Justine I love her. I said I am sorry; I do not tell my children 'I love you'. But the way my mother showed me that she loved me was by providing for me at her expense. That is the same way I show Justine and all my children that I love them. The social worker started coaching me by demonstrating to me how to hug my child to show affection, as if I was a baby. She was saying things to me as if she was talking to a ten-year-old. They treated me as if I could not think.

Building relationships with families during assessments and challenges in assessing parent/ child bond during an access visit.

Social Worker : Mary explained the challenge of determining if she had conducted a comprehensive assessment:

It is difficult to know if you have made a full assessment. Sometimes it is hard to tell if the parents have an attachment with the children or not. They do not display affection like giving a hug or anything like that or tell their children that they love them.

Different ways of lifting children

Social Worker: I watch how they lift their children. It is very aggressive; the movements in African families are rough and it is just how they go on. With Irish families, if they are rough with a child you know that is not always how they go on.

Parent : Mudiwa, an asylum-seeking parent, defended the way she lifted her child.

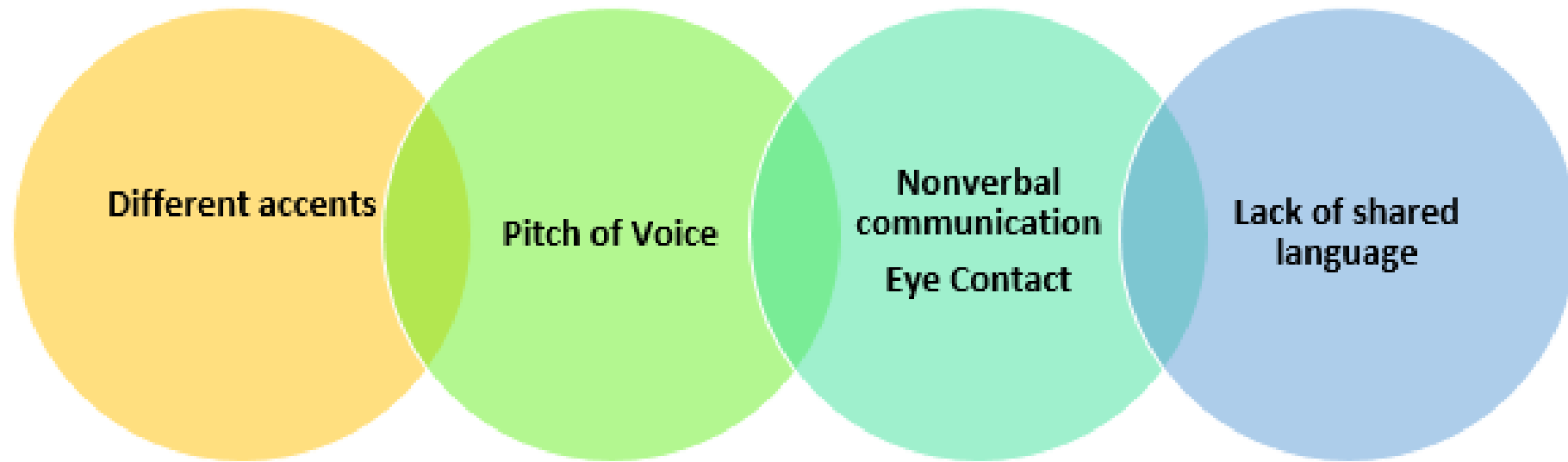
- I can remember one day the social worker said she had come to talk to me about how I handle my child. My mother handled me that way when I was growing up. Is there anything wrong with me? Why do they think their way is the only way? I am not going to break my daughter's arm, I love her. But no, for the social workers, they don't see it that way. They said I was rough.

Some Questions for reflection



- How can social workers navigate the delicate balance between legal requirements and cultural considerations in safeguarding child welfare, ensuring the safety of asylum-seeking children without compromising the parental role, cultural identity, and culturally relevant parenting practices, especially regarding corporal punishment?
- In the face of conflicting perspectives on disciplining children within the diverse cultural backgrounds of asylum-seeking parents, how can social workers harmonize the pursuit of social justice and respect for diversities as defined in international social work principles? Additionally, how can they uphold host country laws that prohibit corporal punishment while addressing the potential misrecognition of culturally sanctioned disciplinary methods?
- Beyond enforcing legislation against corporal punishment, what alternative strategies can social workers employ to effectively engage with families in Direct Provision who may not be familiar with such legal frameworks?

Narratives of cross cultural communication



Challenges in cross cultural communication

- **Social Worker:** After Maombi gave Justine a beating and she was later taken into care I went to visit the family. I tried to explain to Maombi about the purpose of a child-in-care review and how it was important that she should attend, but I was not sure that she understood what I was talking about. She kept saying yes, yes, to everything. I think Maombi, maybe, understood more than she let on, but she did not say much so it was really hard to gauge her level of understanding. I often wondered about her other children because they did not make eye contact when they were talking. You just could not catch their attention and when you did, they engaged very little. It was difficult to assess the level of safety of the children.

Being unable to communicate effectively sometimes made parents feel excluded and disempowered, especially at formal meetings. Asylum-seeking parent Maombi, for example, spoke about her experience of attending a Child-in-Care review meeting:

Parent : *After I had been reported for slapping my daughter, Justine, they asked me to come to a meeting with them and there were a lot of people at the meeting. My daughter Justine was at the meeting too, but I could not understand what they were saying at the meeting. I could understand some words but not everything and I was afraid of what they might do to her.*

Non verbal communication

Social Worker: Eye contact was a big issue for me. The children did not make eye contact when speaking to me. Well, you can imagine what that meant to me – basically, that they were not telling the truth.

On the other hand, Adeola a parent did not understand why the social worker wanted her or her children to look at her when they were speaking. She described the situation:

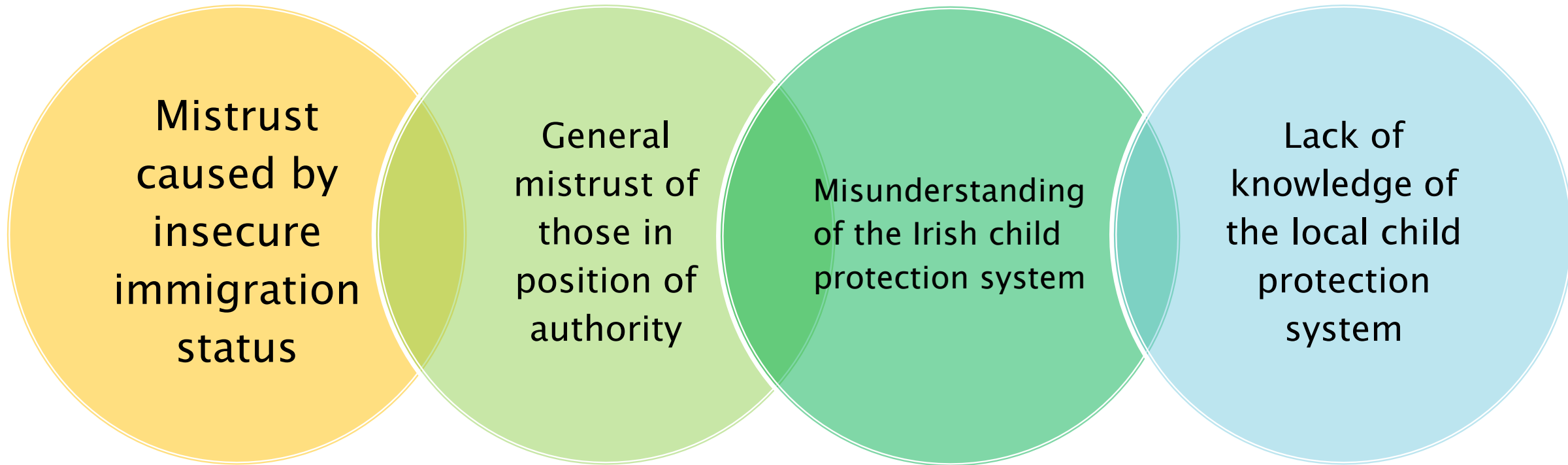
The social worker always insisted on me looking at her face when I was talking to her. She would always say, 'Look at me when you are talking.' I used to feel frightened by this because in my country you don't look at people in authority when they are speaking to you. For the children, when they are speaking to an adult they sit down or kneel and speak without looking at the adults in the eye. It is considered rude in my culture to look at the adult or stand while you are talking to them. I tried to explain this to the social worker, but she kept saying: 'It's okay, you are in Ireland now'.

Understanding the use of gestures

Social Worker:

I do work hard to observe patterns. They make noises when they are cooking and some of them use gestures. I stop them and ask them about some of the gestures they use so that I can make an accurate assessment. If they are rolling their eyes, I ask them, as in I am watching you. For me it means you are annoyed about something. So, I try to check out because I want to see if it is a rude thing they are doing to me or am I getting it? Because you know these things can mean anything. For me, making noises and using gestures gives the impression that you are annoyed about something. I try to check out because I want to see if it is a rude thing they are doing to me or am I getting it? Because, you know, these things can mean anything.

Narratives of mutual mistrust



Narratives of mutual mistrust

Social worker Susan recounted her experience of working with Aminata, a parent who had been reported to have slapped her daughter:

Social Worker: She told me that in her country they slap their children, and this is acceptable as a method of disciplining children. Now, how was I to know if she was telling the truth or not? I did not know enough to challenge her. Besides, I was only freshly out of college.

Aminata was equally mistrustful of the social workers with whom she was involved:

I did not trust the social workers because they wanted me to sign a paper to say I had slapped my child. I am in the asylum process and I really did not like signing papers; it can go against you if immigration people think you are doing something wrong. I was worried about signing the paper, but I had to do it. Later, a neighbour told me to be careful because they can even take my child away.


Narratives of mutual mistrust

Ian Social Worker:

Another thing is that most families who are in the asylum process do not trust social workers because they know we work with immigration officials. At the end of the day we are an authority – like immigration officers. Maybe not in the same way but they know we work together sometimes. We are both official people.

Equally, asylum-seeking parent, Aminata, recounted the difficulties that she had in trusting social workers:

Parent: You would not want to tell them much; you wouldn't know where it will end. They work with the immigration people anyway so it's hard to trust them



Narratives of mutual mistrust


Gráinne, a social worker who worked with siblings – Stephen and his brother Tom – aged 16 and 17 but who had turned 18 and 19 at the time of interviewing, noted the impact of mistrust on her relationship with the children:

Social Worker: I knew from talking to the children that they were suspicious of me, because they said very little. Even when I tried to get to know them by probing into the stories of what life was like at home, they said very little. I tried to earn their trust, but it was difficult to get to know them.

The boys had become adults by the time this research was conducted. One of the boys, Stephen, recounted the experience of working with Gráinne:

Young Person : Expressing gratitude for social worker albeit with some reservation: She accompanied us to Dublin for our meeting with the Department of Justice people. She was kind and spoke to us. She did not mind coming with us even though this was our problem. But social workers are like school teachers, or immigration officers, they ask too many questions. For us it was nice to have the social worker with us when we were going to see the immigration people, but I could not trust the social workers to tell them how we got into the country or anything. They work with immigration officers so maybe they can repeat what you say to them. ... you don't know.

Power Relations

- ▶ Power relations issues related to the care and control role within child protection.
 - ▶ Power imbalances resulting from families lack of knowledge and awareness of their rights, or the social work role.
 - ▶ Reluctance by families to engage due to fear of experiencing religious or cultural discrimination or the fear of having their children removed.
 - ▶ Religious and cultural influences on child-rearing not considered by social workers.
 - ▶ Perceived pressure from professionals to rear children in ways that are deemed the 'norm'.
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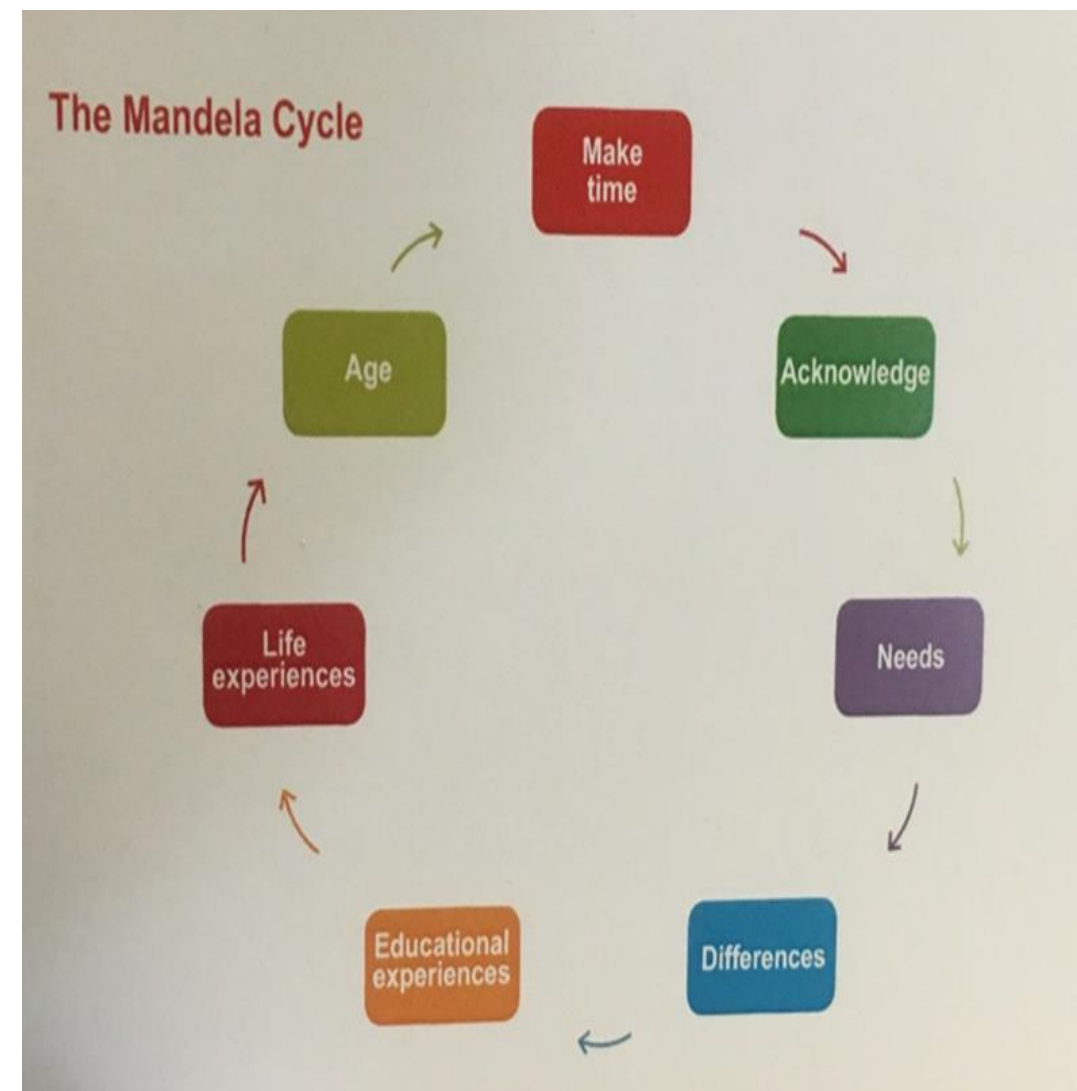


Mandela model of Practice



Developed by Prospera Tedam in 2012 as a relationship based tool. The model is rooted in the values of fairness, justice, equality and reconciliation. It is a tool for anti-discriminatory/Anti-oppressive practice

M	Make Time–We need to make time to build meaningful relationships
AN	Acknowledge Needs
D	Differences – acknowledge differences, cultural,religious,gender,race,ethnicity
E	Educational Experiences: in terms of service users need to understand their levels of literacy, and language proficiency, Sometimes refugees are highly educated
L	Life Experiences– take into account different lived experiences e.g. migration etc.– these shape people’s choices etc.
A	Age: important to think about how age impacts on building relationships,



The 'Social Graces'

- ▶ Developed by John Burnham, Alison Roper-Hall and colleagues in 1992
- ▶ Originally 'disgraces' in order to highlight that inequalities were disgraceful. But overtime the 'dis' was dropped and the 'social' was added to highlight that graces have an impact not only on an individual level, but are activated within the community
- ▶ The graces are not an exhaustive list and can be adapted



The use of self- Self Awareness

- but what about unconscious bias?



The use of self- Self Awareness?

We don't see things
as they are,
we see them
as we are.

- Anaïs Nin



How do we touch another human soul in order to make connection and build relationship?

Know all the theories.


Master all the techniques.

But as you touch a human soul be just another human soul.



Carl Yung

Co- Production

- ▶ Co- production, making time and using even the little time we have is necessary for building meaningful relationships with those seeking international protection
 - ▶ Both the pain and the healing in social work takes place within relationship it's about promoting and maintain relationships with people
 - ▶ Despite the current challenges facing the profession—such as staff shortages, heavy caseloads, professional regulation, and broader external issues stemming from forced migration and displacement of people, coupled with the emergence of far-right influences—our interventions can persist in focusing on building meaningful client/worker relationships
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Thank you for participating and sharing

