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Published in:
Radical Community Work Journal

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Purcell, M. E. (2020). What's so funny about peace, love and understanding? Reflections on professional love as the embodiment of radical community work. *Radical Community Work Journal*, *4*(1).

What's so funny about peace, love and understanding? Reflections on *professional love* as the embodiment of radical community work

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the purpose of community work, particularly as practiced in the most vulnerable communities in the global North, where marginalization, exclusion and oppression are experienced viscerally after forty years of neo-liberalism. Foregrounding the relational nature of community work, it posits the view that practice must be infused with hope, and that the most radical way to achieve this is to demonstrate our love of humanity in all our interactions with oppressed individuals and groups in these communities.

An approach to embedding professionally loving practice in community work is explored and critiqued, repositioning Freire's 'pedagogy of love' at the centre of purposive, transformational community work in late modernity. Also drawing from other radical writers' evocations to similar forms of practice, the paper foregrounds the view that *professional love* should be at the core of radical, hope-inducing community work practice.

The views of one hundred community work practitioners, elicited through their participation in an online survey, are presented. Their contributions demonstrate that there is considerable support for the view that love should feature as a central element of radical community work practice, offering a grounding to be optimistic in these 'troubled times'. Findings form the survey are presented, identifying some of the ways in which respondents exemplify professional love in their practice, highlighting the benefits of *professional love* and raising important questions about the potential pitfalls in this approach.

Key Words

professional love, hope, community work, pedagogy of love, transformation.

Introduction

The social, economic and political conditions that contributed to the "troubled times" featured at the core of Elvis Costello's 1979 song *What's So Funny (About Peace, Love and Understanding)?* – recorded in the early days of neo-liberalism – could be said to prevail now, forty years later (Giroux, 2017; Dorey, 2015). Costello asks himself, as he walks through "this wicked world, searching for light in the darkness of insanity" a question that could easily be uttered by any community worker practicing in the global North today:

"Is all hope lost? Is there only pain and hatred and misery?" (Lowe, 1974).

The answers to his subsequent questions remain equally pertinent, though I contend that in this case, community workers might be the answer to the first query; and the means to locate the missing ingredient in the second:

"Where are the strong, and who are the trusted? And where is the harmony?" (*ibid*)

Grounded in a critical pedagogical framing of community work (Ledwith, 2001), this paper addresses these questions, exploring how 'love' might feature as an element of our practice in pursuit of hope and trust. Drawing on a broad literature and survey responses from over 100 practitioners, the paper makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the importance of the affective domain in radical community work practice.

Firstly, the paper seeks to articulate the challenges facing community work, particularly in the global North, and to chart its role as a conduit of radical "hope in hopeless times" (Lake & Cress, 2017). This foregrounds the need for relational work at the heart of community work, re-connecting the personal experiences of oppressed and fearful individuals with progressive solutions that tackle the structural forces contributing to their sense of vulnerability. Secondly, in focussing on the "affective realm of meaning-making" (Lake & Kress, 2017: 63), the paper explores how radical community work might be imbued with *professional love* (Page, 2011, 2014, 2018; Purcell, 2018) to help individuals to overcome their learnt helplessness and create alternative collective responses to the challenges we face. In addressing these goals, the paper:

(i)   outlines the social, economic and political challenges facing marginalized groups and individuals living through the early twenty-first century, foregrounding their impact on relational aspects of everyday life in the global North;

(ii)   considers the critical pedagogue's role in seeking to effect change with marginalized communities, both in their lived experience and in the structural forces impacting on their lives;

(iii)   determines the contribution that 'love' and 'hope' make in addressing these challenges, when pain and misery might be all we can see around us; and

(iv)   characterises a form of professionally loving practice for twenty-first century community work.

'Troubled Times': Despair & Hope for Radical Community Work

Thus far, the twenty-first century has been a period of unprecedented socio-political tumult, in which national governments throughout the global North have responded to the challenges of the era (including war, mass migration, ecological disaster) with reactionary policies that embrace populism and inculcate xenophobia (Ibrahim, 2019). The success of this re-framing of politics has relied upon the deliberate and systematic 'othering' and de-humanising of large swathes of the global population, whose characteristics can be readily conflated and who can be blamed for all social and economic ills: migrants, young people, low income groups, people of colour, older people, and others who – in neo-liberal terms – may be considered "disposable" (Giroux, 2014). This process is entirely contradictory to the values underpinning community work practice, and the goals for which practitioners strive, namely: social justice and community empowerment through collective action and the promotion of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and human dignity (LLUK, 2009; Aruma & Felicia, 2018).

The Loss of Hope in a World of Hatred and Misery?

In order to bring about radical social change, it is necessary to first critique "the current order of things" (Van Heertum, 2006: 45), so that we understand the nature and scale of the challenge we face. As community work practitioners, we are interested primarily in challenging the oppression inherent in policies and practices of administrations across the world, which has arisen as a result of the evolution over the past four decades of social and economic policies of leaders from across the political spectrum, characterised as:

> "an aggressive ideological and cultural war aimed at undoing the social contract, [where] ignorance has been weaponized … to produce a profoundly disturbing anti-intellectualism that leaves little room for critical reflection" (Giroux, 2017: 889-890).

The enactment of neo-liberal policies over the past forty years has created a population of increasingly isolated individuals who experience a seemingly insurmountable sense of powerless in the face of global challenges which force them to become more inward-looking and open to the lure of reactionary political forces that serve to undermine community and communal wellbeing (Bauman, 2005). Trust within society is eroded, as collectivities fragment, and weakened social structures result in 'hyper-individualisation', meaning that individuals are required to develop personalised solutions to societal problems (Bauman, 2005). This has impacted on community work and other progressive endeavours, to the extent where "trust can only be practiced at the margins" of professional practice (Smith, 2001: 287).

A lack of morality is reflected in the politics shaping the responses to the challenges in these 'troubled times', along with the indifference to others' plight inculcated in people by the reactionary forces controlling the media and formal pedagogical spheres, characterized by "a lack of care, an absence of concern", where individuals are "likely to drift, to act on impulses of expediency" (Thoreau, 1849: 43). The alienation inherent in this situation reflects Freire's notion of "uprootedness" (1973: 37), where there is a disconnect between individuals' consciousness and their understanding of their lived realities.

The impact of this real, dystopian world has been to subordinate critical thinking and dissent; resulting in the deliberate nurturing of a discourse that:

> "feeds off upheaval, political uncertainty and economic precarity through an appeal to authoritarian ideals and policies that offer fraudulently a sense of reassurance and certainty that mitigates radical doubts, feelings of exclusion, anger and anxieties" (Giroux, 2017: 890-891).

How this translates into the lived realities of marginalized and oppressed groups has been widely researched and reported (e.g. Dorling, 2015|2018; Piketty, 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). The lives of these 'disposable' people are blighted by the following characteristics:

- precarity of employment, income, housing, welfare, etc.

- poverty and reliance on charity to meet basic needs

- isolation and loneliness

- community breakdown and a loss of trust in people and institutions

- mental ill health, despair

The challenge for the community worker in this scenario is to work with people to overcome a culture in which only personal politics prevail; where empathy for others "extends only as far as recognizing those who mirror the self"; and critical discourses of power, racism and class are substituted with "the vocabulary of a paralysing and de-politicizing notion of therapy, trauma, character and lifestyles, which coexist with rather than displacing iniquitous and oppressive forms of domination" (Giroux, 2017: 901-902). Consequently, individuals – oppressed by a political system that deliberately perpetrates precarity and "life-draining austerity" – suffer from heightened personal anxieties, uncertainties and misery, arising from the "destruction of the bonds of sociality and solidarity" (*ibid*: 902).

Through the neo-liberal pedagogy that prevails, oppression is perpetrated such that structural pathologies (including poverty, patriarchy, racism, homophobia and inequities in income and power) are re-defined as personal pathologies or shortcomings, to be "overcome by support groups, safe spaces and other reforms" (*ibid*: 902). This is exemplified by government policies ostensibly tackling issues of exclusion and disadvantage (e.g. the welfare reform programme and the 'troubled families' initiative of the Conservative-led UK governments since 2010); these locate responsibility for their predicament firmly within the agentic realm of marginalized individuals, thereby personalising the causes and solutions of social ills (McEnhill & Taylor-Goody, 2018). This is a deliberate attempt to inculcate among the masses "an insidious form of learned helplessness", resulting in a de-politicized passivity, and a form of self-help culture in which "the task of self-transformation and self-help replaces any attempt at structural transformation and political liberation" (*ibid*: 902).

Radical Community Work: Hope in Hopeless Times?

A values-based intervention focused on the achievement of social and environmental justice, community work is achieved through collective action, participatory democracy, empowerment and critical consciousness building (Ledwith, 2011). This radical form of community work seeks to counter the impact of social and institutional structures which

oppress and disregard people's humanity, limiting and denigrating the oppressed (Freire, 1970). It promotes transformation – or radical social change – through progressive, critical pedagogical practice, exposing alternative social realities and raising the collective experiences of oppressed groups in society (Beck & Purcell, 2010; Thompson, 1997).

Current forms of community work practice are inevitably shaped and influenced by the prevalent social and political norms; and have been constrained as government resources have been diverted away from supporting this practice, given the contradiction between its values-base and the prevalent neo-liberal agenda (Fabiani & Buss, 2014). As the challenges facing societies across the global North persist and become more extreme, it is likely that radical community work will need to respond increasingly to myriad issues, including economic precarity, migration and disaster response (especially due to climate change and acts of terror). At the same time, a return to traditional forms of engagement will be needed: building social capital, developing community leadership, promoting participation in decision-making, capacity development, and community empowerment (Van Laerhoven & Barnes, 2014: i119).

The critical approaches that characterize community work must also be sensitive to different contexts, allowing alternative responses to 'similar' challenges to emerge from discourse within and between oppressed groups: there are no universal solutions to the embedded conceits of injustice and the abuse of power (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007: 16). These open and free discussions require individuals to have the necessary cognitive and social skills to participate, to which end the role of radical community work is also to develop people's skills to enable them to take part constructively (Moghaddam, 2018: 133).

Rejecting the view that oppression prohibits the potential for transformation in the lives of the oppressed, Freire (1985) argues that progressive community practice must be fuelled with critical optimism; similarly, Giroux (1985: xvi) cautions against engaging in a "discourse of despair". Community work practitioners are uniquely placed to raise awareness of and challenge epistemic violence and injustice: where the "pathology of oppression and domination inherent in Western subjectivity" silences (or further ignores) the voice of marginalized groups and individuals disadvantaged by the combination of overlaid forms of discrimination and oppression (particularly socio-economic status, class, ethnicity and [dis]ability) (Robinson-Morris, 2019: 35; Fricker, 2007). The relationships that practitioners

maintain with these communities should be developed in such a way that they help them to regain some control over their response to the impact of this inter-sectionality on their lived experience. In so doing, practitioners should give priority in their work to the aspects that feature most in communities' perceptions of their own wellbeing, specifically relational components (Statham & Chase, 2010: 3).

Crucially, having critiqued the *status quo*, radical community work should lead to the generation of a clearly-articulated vision for the future (Van Heertum, 2006). This stimulates "critical protest" against the way things are, and inculcates protest as a form of critical hoping (Webb, 2013: 402). Here, hope and curiosity converge in a "struggle against oppressive and dehumanizing structures", as "there can be no *conscientization* without denunciation of unjust structures" (Freire, 1985: 85).

The challenges outlined above are neither new, nor insurmountable. Indeed, having worked with oppressed groups to confront not dissimilar challenges over an extended period, Freire concluded that "the future is problematic rather than inexorable" (2004: 99), leading him to promote a 'pedagogy of hope' throughout his writing, concluding that hope is essential if people are to be able to overcome the cynical and ahistorical fatalism at the heart of neo-liberal ideology (e.g. 1994; 1998). Contrary to the view that we are living in hopeless times, even through the onslaught of neo-liberal policies, being hopeful is central to the collective cognitive-emotional orientation, even in advanced capitalist societies (Webb, 2013). Hope is a socially mediated state of mind, influenced by varying affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions, meaning that it will be experienced differently by people, even those living in similar circumstances (*ibid*). While despair "leaves no room for optimism or movement because of the overwhelming power of the obstacles in our way as educators", hope is "a necessary ingredient" in enacting transformation, creating "room for movement, for possibilities to create different outcomes" (Daniels, 2012: 12).

Not only is change possible, but in light of the destabilizing impact that neo-liberalism has on all things in the natural and social world, "self-other-world transformation is necessary for the survival of all living things" (Lake & Cress, 2017: 69). The rapid increase in public participation in movements promoting radical alternatives to current responses to the most pressing policy issues of our time (e.g. climate-change protests, the anti-capitalist

movement, antifa protests) provide cause for hope in this regard (Amelung & Baumgarten, 2017; Purcell, 2019).

Radical hope moves the individual from a position of passivity born of an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, to one in which they actively reconfigure their world view, and become active players in the renewal of society and the alleviation of human suffering (Freire, 1985). At the same time, it allows the individual to consider that there may be possibilities for a life to flourish beyond their current set of circumstances, albeit life in a form that cannot be anticipated. Such hope is radical because it is "directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is" (Lear, 206:103).

Radical community work seeks to intervene in people's experience, encouraging the questioning of their lived reality, thereby promoting an "awakening" (Thoreau, 1849) and a move towards critical action born of a critical understanding of the political, economic and social injustices that impact on their lives (Freire, 1973: 44). While painting a decidedly bleak picture of the lived experiences of the oppressed majority, Giroux reflects Freire's position in promoting practice that accentuates hope and possibility over the potential for despair and hopelessness, describing hope as:

> "an important political and subjective register that can not only enable people to think beyond the neoliberal austerity machine … but also to advance forms of egalitarian community that celebrate the voice, well-being, inherent dignity, and participation of each person as an integral thread in the ever-evolving fabric of living democracy" (2014: 18-19).

Giroux (1997: 228) advocates working with people to elicit "formative narratives" which can be utilised to provide a focal point to generate their commitment to transformative practices. Community work thus becomes a foundation for "hope in action", a form of collective resistance transforming anger into collective struggle, thereby making "despair unconvincing and struggle possible" (Giroux, 2017: 905). Our practice in this characterization should promote consciousness and sustain actions in marginalized communities, connecting people engaged in struggles against oppression on a global level (addressing issues as disparate as homelessness, mental health, incarceration, knife crime and other forms of communal violence, racism, poverty and 'austerity', etc.), to build a broad-based social movement for change (*ibid*).

This form of practice is possible precisely because hope is "the most human of all emotions" (Bloch, 1986: I-74), and is essential for social processes to flourish: without hope, there would be "no plausible tomorrow and no continuous social arrangements" (Tiger, 1999: 622). Hope enables individuals and communities to respond effectively to the fact that the material world is constantly in flux, reflecting the fact that their only hope in responding to their ever-changing and intolerable circumstances lies in a "revolutionary becoming" (Deleuze, 1990). Practice imbued with hope is the enactment of a critical pedagogy, allowing people to imagining how things could be (Muñoz & Duggan, 2009: 278), and enabling people to connect and act collectively:

> "If we are to empower people to hope and dream of a different reality, we must … [convince] them that real freedom is not an individualistic pursuit but one predicated on the fostering of a community, where the reality principle is a boon rather than the source of our repression" (Van Heertum, 2006: 50).

Radical practice incorporates three elements: empowering people to overcome cynicism and re-ignite hope; promoting discourse to re-channel desire, to overcome repression and sublimation; and creating a normative ideal (or a dream founded on affirmative ethics) to work towards (*ibid*). Working in this way with oppressed groups and individuals requires all those involved to orient themselves towards others "in a spirit of loyalty, fidelity and love" (Webb, 2013: 401).

Towards a Hopeful Pedagogy of Love

In seeking to engender hopefulness in the hearts of those with whom we work, community workers' practice should be shaped by a 'pedagogy of love' (Darder, 2002). Indeed, Fromm asserts that only the pursuit of love of life, independence, freedom, and reason can counter the "syndrome of decay" (1980: 161). In order to promote a society underpinned by security, justice and the freedom to become a responsible community member for all, Fromm believes that people should relate to each other lovingly, and should be able to express their inner needs collectively (Fromm, 1963 | 1964; cited in Houseden, 2014).

Love as the underpinning drive behind radical community work and critical education may be conceived in many ways, building on the exhortations of Freire and hooks (*op cit*). Building on these foundational ideas, the inter-connectivity between love and hope induces

practitioners to embrace loving forms of practice (e.g. Robinson-Morris, 2019; Hanh, 2015; Lamas & Zembylas, 2015; Sandoval, 2000). Here, love in practice is characterized as:

> "an all-encompassing force … which compels us toward radical hope and opens the possibility of an ethical, more humane future, free of the violence of domination" (Robinson-Morris, 2019: 28-29).

Specifically, community work practiced as the embodiment of the act of a love of humanity requires the practitioner to embrace their ethical responsibility towards the people with whom they are working, requiring genuine acts of generosity, sacrifice, challenge and support; further, they should demonstrate care, affection, mutual respect, and loving speech towards members of the community (*op cit*: 36). Conceiving of love as love as a "mode of social and psychic activism" (Sandoval, 2000: 188), loving practice contains four elements with the power to heal any situation, however hopeless it may seem: loving-kindness; compassion; joy; and equanimity (Hanh, 2015).

Responding with "revolutionary love" need not mean repressing other emotional responses to alienation like fear, shame, anger, hatred, or despair; rather, it is a transformational response to these, entailing six perspectives: it is an emotion, a choice, and a response, and it is simultaneously relational, political, and praxis (Lanas & Zembylas, 2018: 274). Love can be invoked as a means of overcoming the challenge of forming collectivities to overthrow unjust structures, particularly where the social relationships of production cannot easily be reconciled with individual progress (recognizing the importance of emotional labour, kin work and domestic labour) (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Loving practice in this analysis makes it possible for people to recognize others as allies with shared interests in current global struggles (around gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality, etc.).

At the heart of radical community work is a commitment to the "creation of a world in which it will be easier to love", and to conceiving of education as "an act of love"; hence, it is "impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love" (Freire, 1970: 24; 35). Progressive pedagogical practice uses dialogue as a means of transformation, requiring practitioners to support the development of individuals' criticality, thereby enabling them to better understand the structural forces that have shaped their lives (Miller, Brown & Hopson, 2011; Darder, 2002). Crucially, dialogue "cannot exist in the

absence of a profound love for the world and for people", and love "is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (Freire, 1970: 89). Love, in this conceptualization, is "an act of courage ... a commitment to others ... [and] to the cause of liberation … [which], because it is loving, is dialogical" (*ibid*: 78). Dialogical love – characterized by practice imbued with humility, faith in and solidarity with the people, hope and critical thinking – is the means by which the denigration felt by the oppressed can be overcome (*ibid*). In focusing on critical thought, Freire denounces the present (dystopia) in favour of an ethico-political future (utopia). The importance of the relational aspects of practice is emphasised in this analysis, as – while utopian thought engages the reflective domain – the utopian urge (or hope for a better future world) concerns the affective domain (Papastephanou, 2015: 33).

In considering their approach to transforming society, practitioners might consider the view that love is "the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence", as "any society which excludes, relatively, the development of love, must in the long run perish of its own contradiction with the basic necessities of human nature" (Fromm, 1956: 111-112). Similarly, in framing their approach to this transformation, practitioners might conceive of love as "an active force that should lead us into greater communion with the world … [and that] when practiced with the community, love is the primary way we end domination and oppression" (hooks, 2000: 76). This realisation might inform practice that nurtures individuals' spiritual growth and self-love, based on self-regard and assertiveness. Here, love is 'weaponised' in the battle to reclaim our humanity, and may be conceived of as a form of resistance to all forms of subjugation and oppression by the powerful (*ibid*). This "armed love" is the love the practitioner holds for humanity and the people with whom they are working, which is "a fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, and denounce, and announce" (Freire, 2005: 74); furthermore, it provides both a counter-story and an antidote to the narratives of oppression impacting on the lives of marginalised communities and vulnerable people (Daniels, 2012: 43).

The actions that constitute pedagogical love, and which might usefully be enacted by community work practitioners include: forging mutual respect; seeking to understand the circumstances within which people find themselves; demonstrating empathy towards individuals' circumstances; setting high expectations for individuals and groups; creating and

sustaining community within and between groups; advocating on behalf of oppressed groups and vulnerable individuals; providing a safe space for participants; listening to people's stories and their concerns; demonstrating resilience; and being creative and playful (*ibid*: 66). This form of 'armed love' requires practitioners to be daring, courageous, creative and spirited in their work; and for them to be willing to act as "anchors in the seas of injustice" for the people with whom they are working (*ibid*: 68).

In advocating for an increased focus on the role of love in the professional relationships between practitioners and oppressed groups and individuals, I am aware of the need to overcome inherent cynicism which leads people to believe that "there is no love to be found and that relationships are needed only to the extent that they satisfy desires … [meaning that] friendships or loving community cannot be sustained" (hooks, 2000: 115). Likewise, although discussing radical community work in the global North, it is important – given the multi-cultural nature of most European-centric societies – to acknowledge the impact of different cultural traditions on practice. For example, failure to understand and act on the nuanced meanings of terms that might appear as literal translations of their English counterparts (terms such as *educacion*, *personalismo*, etc.) can result in further marginalization of oppressed groups and vulnerable individuals (Daniels, 2012: 55)[1].

The importance of love as a foundational element of practice features in hooks' (1994) explication of what she terms 'engaged pedagogy', in which she highlights indispensable qualities for progressive educators, including tolerance – a quality that comes from our ability to love human beings – which she conceives of as a revolutionary virtue opposed to sectarianism. Engaged pedagogy becomes an act of love when practice allows for both parties – community worker and community members – to be vulnerable in mutually revealing personal lived experiences. Here, the community worker takes the lead, using revelation of their own histories to facilitate movement from a position of 'safety' to a place of resistance, empowering people through deconstructing perceptions and creating new understanding of their own oppression.

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[1] Drawn from practice in disparate cultures, other terms incorporating notions akin to a pedagogy of love (cited in Daniels, 2012), include: *Warm Demander Pedagogy* (Ware, 2006) and *Culturally Relevant Critical Teacher Care* (Roberts, 2010), as practiced in African American schools-communities; *Critical Care* (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006); *Relational Literacy* (North, 2009); and *Societal Healing* (Philips, 2006).

Professionally Loving Practice and *Professional Love*

While little has yet been written about love and community work *per se*, it is a notion that has been discussed widely in other professional contexts. In particular, this exploration of the potential for love to shape community work practice in order to heighten its transformative potential draws from the fields of social pedagogy and early years education. In both these spheres, it seems that the emphasis on relational interactions in the affective realm allow for a more open discussion of this aspect of practice[2].

Specifically, in applying the concept of *professional love* to community work practice, I draw on Page's critique of attachment-based relationships between infants and their professional adult caregivers (2011; 2014; 2018). *Professional love* offers a valuable perspective from which to explore non-familial love as an element of work with vulnerable groups and individuals, providing a set of empirically-tested underpinning principles that can be applied in community work practice.
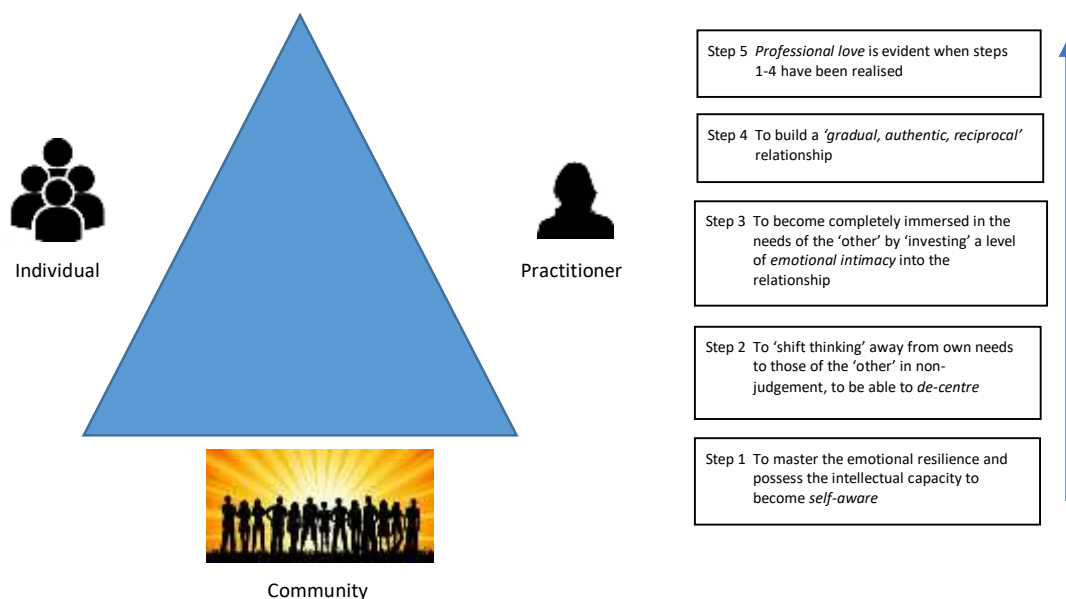
Drawing extensively on research into the ethic of care, and the education and wellbeing of children (Noddings, 2003; Gilligan, 1982), Page (2018) presents a compelling argument for practice to be informed by a "pedagogy of love", ensuring that all children "know and understand that they are worthy of being loved", providing a basis for their "emotional resilience, learning and ultimately independence" (*op cit*: 134). This reflects the view that infants require "sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they have formed a deep and sustaining relationship" (Page, 2014: 125), something which is particularly important for 'vulnerable' children (corresponding with community work's engagement with society's most marginalized communities).

Page (2018) locates the practitioner in a reciprocal relational model with the child and their primary caregiver(s), where causal flows are tri-polar and the practitioner buttresses and complements familial love for the child, contributing to the mutual enhancement of participants' wellbeing. She suggests that practice can be characterised as *professional love* when "reciprocity exists, and as the relationship deepens, then the compulsion to care,

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[2] For instance, special issues on 'love' as an element of practice have been published by the *International Journal of Social Pedagogy* and the *International Journal of Early Years Education.*

together with the capacity to de-centre and invest a level of emotional intimacy into the relationship" (*op cit*: 134).

Figure 1: *Professional Love* conceptualised

Individual

Practitioner

Community

Step 5 *Professional love* is evident when steps 1-4 have been realised

Step 4 To build a *'gradual, authentic, reciprocal'* relationship

Step 3 To become completely immersed in the needs of the 'other' by 'investing' a level of *emotional intimacy* into the relationship

Step 2 To 'shift thinking' away from own needs to those of the 'other' in non-judgement, to be able to *de-centre*

Step 1 To master the emotional resilience and possess the intellectual capacity to become *self-aware*

(adapted from Page, 2018: 135)

In order to provide 'healthy', purposeful and consciously-informed relationships with young children, Page (2018) identifies four sequential steps which practitioners must embed in their relational work with children in their care before *professional love* can be realised as a fifth step in the hierarchy (see Figure 1). In achieving these stages of development in their work with children, Page asserts that professionally loving practitioners will exhibit motivational displacement, attunement and reciprocity; developing deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships. Furthermore, she maintains they will embed the rights of the child wholly at the centre of every aspect of practice. This involves a shift in their thinking: by deliberately investing in a level of professional emotional intimacy as opposed to a level of professional distance, they intellectualise their experience of the relationship as 'loving'.

Data Generation & Analysis

This paper draws on a pilot study to test the applicability of Page's conceptualization of *professional love* in a community work context. Using a hermeneutical-constructivist approach (Peck & Mummery, 2017), the study sought to elicit the views of community work practitioners working in different settings across the globe. This approach allows the

researchers' prejudice – or my judgment on the theme of the enquiry – to be "projected towards an aspect of the world [the research participants]" … and to … "make the world respond", thereby helping to determine the adequacy of the prejudice as a means of understanding the phenomenon under investigation (*op cit*: 394).

This stage of the study involved the development of an online survey, promoted to practitioners through a web-based networking site for global professionals. Personal invitations were sent by direct messaging to over 1,000 practitioners, who were provided with access to previous writing on *professional love* (Purcell, 2018); they were then asked to complete the survey to provide their perspective on the themes explored there (and in more depth in this paper). The survey was closed once 100 responses had been generated, in order to keep the data set at a manageable size.

Participants identified a variety of roles in which they were engaged (several reporting that they occupied multiple roles), including most commonly (each around 10% of the sample): community work worker (with more self-identifying as freelance than contracted); community organiser; community engagement / voice worker; community planning / support worker. Around 15% of the sample worked in managerial roles and a similar proportion were involved in academic teaching and research in the field (reflecting the make-up of my professional network); all of these had prior experience in practice. Interesting self-identifiers included: 'pioneer steward' and 'nomad'.
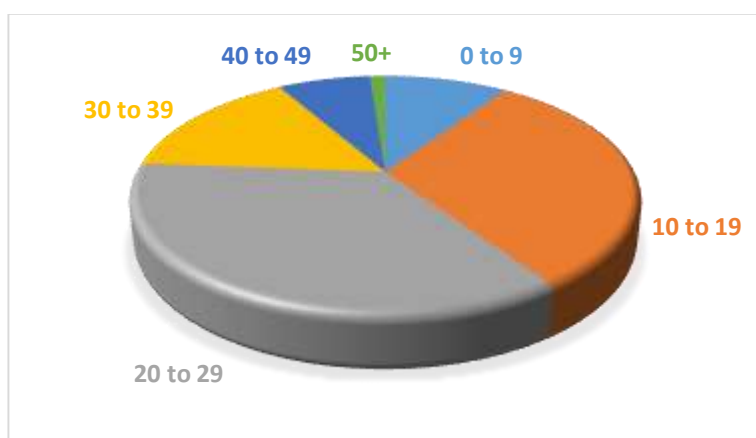

Figure 2: Respondents' experience - number of years in community work

Respondents drew on a substantial amount of experience in delivery, management and academic activities related to community work practice. As detailed in Figure 2, more than

three-quarters of respondent had over 10 years' experience in community work; and more than a quarter had over 30 years' experience.

The key ethical consideration in my approach to research generation and recording was the desire to capture the authentic voice of the participants, especially as they were essentially critiquing my stance. The intention of sharing an example of my previous writing on the subject was to effectively project my 'prejudice' to participants, giving them time to reflect on my proposition before engaging in the enquiry. Given my appreciation that the 'contentious' nature of the subject had the potential to be unsettling for respondents, the right to withdraw or to limit participation was emphasised; to date, none have requested that their data be withdrawn.

Thematic analysis was used to draw meaning from the data, acknowledging its applicability in applied research as a means of identifying and making sense of commonalities in the respondents' stories (Clarke & Brown, 2018). In particular, as I was effectively determining the extent to which participants' views corresponded with my own emerging thesis, it is important to acknowledge that the themes did not 'emerge' fully formed from the data; rather, they can be conceived of as "*active creations* of the researcher(s) … [who] … capture implicit meaning beneath the data surface" (Clarke & Brown, 2018: 108). The themes I sought clarity on in this research are broadly as detailed in the foregoing discussion and summarised below:

- the contribution practitioners can make to helping communities to better understand and address their needs, especially the validity of the term *professional love* when considering their practice
- the characteristics of professionally loving practice in community work
- any counter narrative to challenge my 'prejudices'

Although exploring the veracity of my own ideas, I have nevertheless centred the voice of participants in this analysis. I recognise how I am situated professionally and emotionally in relation to respondents, and the power I wielded in relation to the extent to which I "discover or construct" the story that I drew from the data (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003: 419, 424). This necessitated multiple readings of responses, identifying (and correcting)

occasions where my own prejudices and value judgements may have over-ridden the respondents' intentions.

Practitioners' Perspectives

The importance of love in community work

When asked to rate the importance of a range of elements of practice, 63% of respondents ascribed 'allowing people to feel loved' as essential. Although this placed explicit reference to loving practice sixth out of eight named elements (see Figure 3), some of the other more highly placed elements touched on the affective domain (e.g. being compassionate and acknowledging feelings).
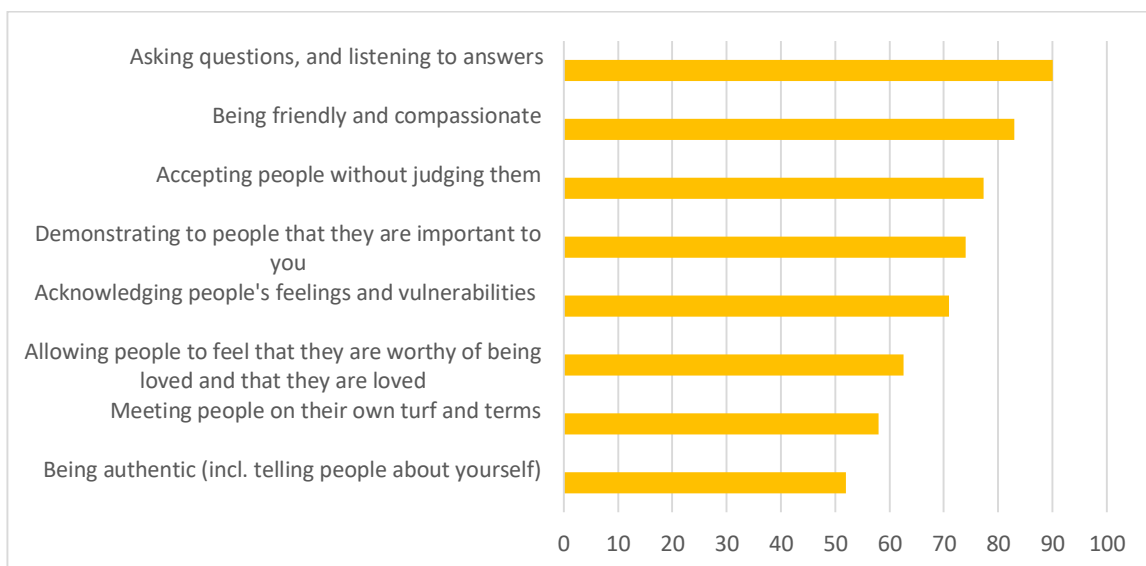

Figure 3: Essential components of practice

As shown in Figure 4, below, 82% of respondents indicated that a 'love of humanity' is extremely / very important in motivating them or shaping their work in maintaining effective and appropriate relationships with members of the community; none suggested that this is not at all important.
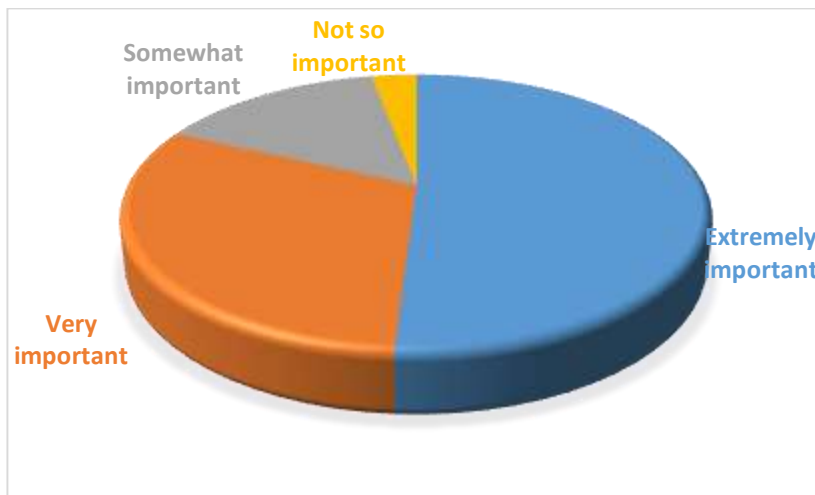
Figure 4: Importance a 'love of humanity' in motivating or shaping practitioners' work?

Community work as values-based practice

The words used most frequently in respondents' discussion of the professional values underpinning their practice – when reflecting in particular on shaping their relationships with members of the community – were respect, integrity, honesty, power and trust. Figure 5 shows the number of respondents who used each of these terms (the only ones used by ten respondents or more).
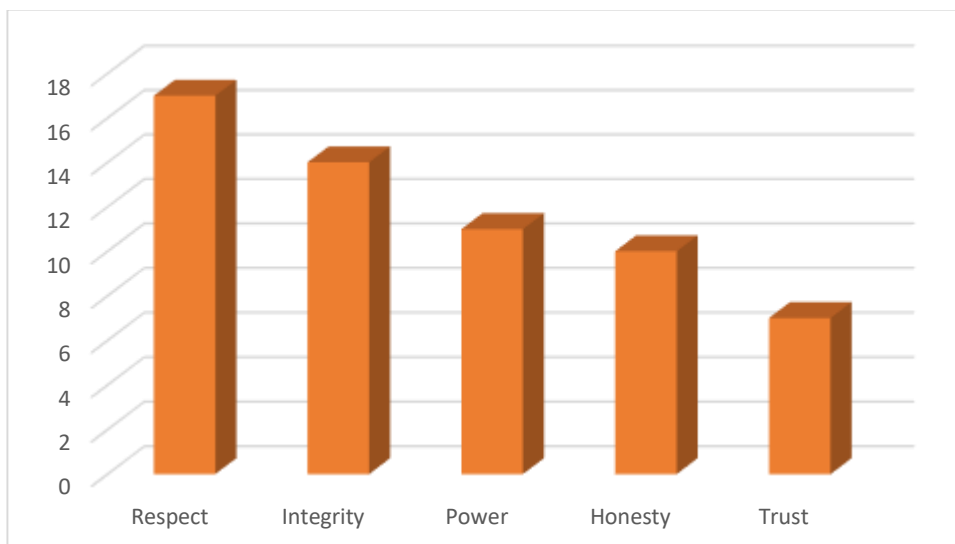

Figure 5: Key professional values underpinning practice

Interestingly, explicit reference to 'love' only featured in four respondents' discussion of values, one simply listing their values as: "open, loving, honest, welcoming, caring". Nevertheless, a number of responses touched on the affective realm. For instance, one highlighted the importance of "… unconditional positive regard for others, reciprocity, open

heart, open mind, authenticity, person-centred …"; another articulated their "… sincere desire to help people to learn, grow, and improve their lives …"; while one more claimed they strive to "see every person as the valuable, interesting, unique individual they are". One respondent identified the connection between love and anti-oppressive practice, claiming:

> "I have always thought the critique of philanthropy and patronizing, class-based approaches was very important. So equality and solidarity, and some version of justice are important aspects of love".

Discussing how love might be conceived as an underpinning value shaping their practice, one respondent claimed to have "… seen magical transformation by treating citizens to feel they are truly valuable and powerful, and should not define themselves as the sum of all the problems in their community"; this view was supported by another respondent, who suggested that their values base means: "seeing the person for who they are and not the stereotypes, behaviours or 'issues'". Articulating how this translates into loving practice, one respondent asserted that "there is a great power in showing your own vulnerability to people that helps them connect to you on a more meaningful level"; while another suggested that loving practice is a communal process, where:

> "we do not deny their negative feelings or judge their opinions but we work together to listen to them, understand them and then provide opportunities for shared learning and connection that helps to educate and shift perceptions".

Privileging the relational in our work

Two quotes from the survey encapsulate the oft-cited view among respondents that meaningful, purposive relationships, fuelled by love, are at the core of effective community work practice:

> "I love the people I work with. This makes them feel valued. Valuing people builds relationships, without a relationship the work I do could not take place".

> "I strongly believe in the power of love and connections as a vehicle for building relationships and enabling positive social change across the globe".

Another respondent complained that "the way in which community workers build personal relationships with community members to carry out effective work is often ignored or tackled superficially by assuming you 'just' build trust without exploring how best to do that and the other personal components of a relationship". The following discussion outlines some of the ways in which respondents felt that community work practitioners might build relationships with vulnerable and marginalised groups and individuals.

The key verb used to describe practice was *listen*, used by more than 20% of those who responded; one respondent expanded on this:

> "Deep listening is a two way conversation that allows people to connect at an empathic level, one where different lived experience's converge to create new possibilities for change. I feel that one needs to meet everyone with love".

Honesty featured in several responses (around 15%), as did support (13%); a small but significant proportion of respondents referred to boundaries (7%); while other terms used by 5% or more of respondents included care, open, present / presence and challenge.

Demonstrating care for and genuine interest in the individual with whom you are working featured centrally in these discussions. This does not imply taking control of people's lives, or ignoring difficult conversations, as these contributions demonstrate: "showing that I care, I am thoughtful of them, they can contact me regardless of how busy I am but also I can have honest conversations with them should I need to"; and "show your truth that you care, but you are not a rescuer or a savior, as this leads to a power hierachy." This also means "remembering people's stories, and being able to ask after family or about situations which they told me before"; and demonstrating care by "sharing my own life experiences, finding common ground, asking questions about people's lives … finding time for the personal"; as well as "remembering people's chosen names, and using them. This as an act of *authentic connection*. Asking people about themselves, shutting up and listening".

This issue of authenticity featured in a number of responses; for example: "conducting myself in an authentic, inquisitive manner and providing challenge where appropriate"; "… be myself and be honest about who I am, identify shared interest and values"; "I find *reliable presence* to be of incredible importance". One respondent highlighted the importance of self-love as a pre-cursor to being able to engage in meaningful relational

work, claiming that in furtherance of this they: "strive towards an enhanced practice of self-care to preserve both the integrity and boundaries of my role, and my ability to take care of myself in order to be able to continue in my role". Explaining and managing boundaries effectively featured in several responses, with one respondent linking this to "consistency … making sure that I do what I say and that I don't disappear when things are challenging"; linked to which another highlighted the need to: "seek consent for all aspects of the work throughout".

Demonstrating *professional love* in community work practice

When asked to describe how they demonstrate 'love' in their professional relationships with members of the community, most respondents (over 85) again highlighted certain key themes, most notably care / caring, respect, empathy and compassion (all of which were mentioned in more than 15 responses). Several respondents indicated that this is an issue of significant concern to them when reflecting on their practice, one asserting that love is of "paramount importance for my role"; another claiming they aspire to bring "the components of love … to my practice". Crucially, one respondent identified *professional love* as a constant element of their practice, which "has to be maintained - not something you pick up when you want"; while another characterised it simply as an extension of "living a 'loving life'".

Notions of acceptance and connectivity between practitioner and community member were at the heart of most contributions on how to demonstrate *professional love*, as exemplified by these responses: "… accepting people for who they are"; and "… by demonstrating a connection with them, that is, by identifying something that draws us together, something we have in common". Typically, this can be demonstrated by:

> "… remembering things about the person, being interested in what they think, say, do … and smiling when I see them - no matter what they have said or done before"; and showing "… personal enjoyment in the work - I love what I do, I love working with you people … I care what happens to this community … I care what happens to you as people involved in your community …"

One respondent located "warmth and connection at the heart of all [their] interactions", asserting that "humour is a great way of connecting". This complemented another

respondent's practice of "creating a space where people can be present as themselves and be 'known'". Other respondents highlighted the importance of "valuing contributions … not being shocked … reaching out to those excluded or on the periphery"; and "validating others' opinions and celebrating individual's successes and personal assets".

The temporal element of connectivity featured in several responses, with this powerful reference to the privilege of extended contact with people typifying these:

> "I work in the very large village I have lived in and delivered children's and youth work for decades. This means I have a very real emotional investment in the people I work with and FOR and there is often already a foundation or legacy of mutual trust, respect and affection. A possible unique situation that makes this kind of "love" much easier. It has been the result of long-term involvement of which few professionals have the advantage".

Professionally loving practice was also characterized as: being demonstrably "always happy to see the people I work with. I look forward to hearing their news - the successes and the positives things that may have happened since we last met"; "remembering people's situations and referring to them when appropriate; and "[I demonstrate my love by] remembering what is going on in the life of each person I work with".

Authenticity also featured as a key component in several responses, with one respondent detailing how:

> "It [authenticity] is communicated organically through the level of care you observe to members of the community you work with. [It] can be sensed in genuine concern for them and the lives they lead, respect and communicated interest given by you to what matters to them. Where their concerns inform what you do, rather than 'doing stuff' and putting your agenda first. Time spent in genuine context-setting. Explaining what you are doing and why. Getting express consent for what you're doing, even at the cost of timeliness and organisational schedules".

While the extent to which practitioners should disclose personal information to members of the community with whom they work was not critiqued, several respondents identified the

two-way nature of the relationship as being important. Love in practice was described by one respondent as "reciprocated", implying self-disclosure; other respondents characterised the strengthening of relationships through the conscious use of self as: "… sharing personal life and feelings …"; "showing love by demonstrating vulnerability *where appropriate*" (emphasis added); being "open about my own weaknesses and vulnerability"; and "forgiving failings in myself and others".

The need to demonstrate love to people for whom the practitioner does not have warm feelings was addressed by one respondent, who argued that: "I sometime work with people I don't actually like, they would not be my friend outside of my job, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't/wouldn't work with them". Linked to this, another respondent highlighted the need to demonstrate "high regard for those with the lowest levels of personal regard, seeing the potential in people – to be seen in this world is truly powerful".

I feel that sharing stories of positive resistance with love is a key step to breaking down some of these chains and challenging some of these limiting beliefs.

Not judging, having a laugh with them, showing compassion, being on their side, telling them I wish good things for them. Being positive, encouraging them, telling them how brave they are & how far they have come. Being genuine is really important … people can always tell if someone isn't going for the right reasons.

Physical contact was mentioned in a small number of responses, demonstrating perhaps the challenge of unpicking this typical element of human interaction from more sinister motivations (as one respondent noted: "touch – sometimes, and with care"). In each of the following responses, physical touch is located in and amongst a range of other actions deemed necessary to sustain a professionally loving relationship: "*A hug*. Listening. Giving my time and expertise. Making things happen for them that improves their lives"; "Listening with full attention, smiling, *showing physical affection where appropriate (e.g. touching an arm)*, asking questions, remembering names and information about people". Another respondent also located physical contact within a wider range of interactions

> "It's important to be understanding and compassionate towards others in order to build positive relationships. We do this by listening, *welcoming people with hugs and smiles*, showing them we are pleased to see them,

helping them to recognise their achievements and growth and praising them for this. Thanking people for their time, knowledge and friendship - letting them know we value and appreciate the relationships and opportunities they present."

Caveats Emptor?

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the thesis on which this study was based was not wholeheartedly embraced by all respondents. For some, their participation in this research was out of curiosity:

A small but significant minority of respondents (ten in total) expressed skepticism, and – in some cases – open hostility to the ideas promoted as discussion points. One respondent said they find the term "phoney"; another "too mawkish"; and a third "too *icky*". Others asserted that they don't demonstrate 'love', preferring other terms such as "professionalism", "kindness", "empathy", "solidarity", "unconditional positive regard", "respect" and "non-judgmental practice" instead.

One typical skeptic claimed to find the term 'love' problematic, as it can be "equated with unprofessional acts". Similarly, asserting that 'love' is too emotive a word, "not usually used in community work terms", another respondents went on to claim that "it [love] could be an unrealistic expectation for workers who strive to resolve conflict situations, and can also be subjected to abuse and personal attacks". A further respondent felt that 'love' is "too vague a term, yet a term loaded with connotations", a view echoed by one who suggested that they would "hesitate to use the word 'love' as it can conjure up inappropriate attributes".

Finally, asserting that "the phrase will never catch on, as it's too emotive", one skeptic articulated the view that use of "the L word" is not always to be found in people's discourse around people they live with and care about, saying: "I think there are other ways to describe the nature of the right relationships … and *we also need to allow people to hate people too …* sometimes with good reason".

The act of participating in the research impacted on the views of some previously skeptical practitioners. For instance, the perspective of this respondent, who started off stating that they didn't feel comfortable with using the term *professional love*, changed to such an

extent that they ended up being more open to the potential for this notion to at least be discussed:

> "It's not a word or concept I use … but, in taking care to build trust, honesty in a kind and considerate way, giving time and listening deeply, giving real weight to the other person's perspectives and ambitions - and supporting them to act on their ambitions - I acknowledge it can be seen as *professional love*".

Similarly, this respondent confessed that they were "still struggling with that word", and that terms such as "respect" and "care" sat more easily for them. Nevertheless, they went on to say that they "sometimes feel big emotions like anger and upset at injustice, sad life stories and poverty. I do say how I feel at these times and I guess that is part of demonstrating this."

The overwhelming majority of respondents either expressed enthusiastic support for the concepts put forward in this research, or were at least happy to discuss them. There was widespread gratitude that *professional love* was being investigated, as exemplified here: "Without love it is impossible to serve. True service can only be motivated by love"; "love is vital in every aspect of life. We can choose how we show it or receive it. I give and receive a lot of love from my community … love I never even knew existed". Nevertheless, some of the positive responses included *caveats emptor*, suggesting that we should not apply this term carelessly. For instance, one respondent whose views were broadly supportive of embracing the language of love in considering community work felt that:

> "a great degree of self-awareness is required. *Professional love* is not *professional love* when it takes advantage of a situation for one's own purpose. It is not about developing and growing one's own ego or status."

Similarly, another respondent argued that *professional love* is "essential … it's like being empathetic … without this there is no point in the work". However, they cautioned that it "takes its toll personally in the form of vicarious trauma for those workers, and workers with the best intent get burnt out or go off with stress-related issues". Similarly, one respondent – having said they want "to shout it [*professional love*] from the rooftops!" highlighted the potential for "the emotional labour of *professional love* [to] become a burden … [especially] where personal ethics/boundaries are not thought out".

Conclusions

This paper has outlined a crucial perspective on how radical community work can be practiced in such a way as to enable vulnerable individuals, groups and communities to address the challenges they face in these 'troubled' – or seemingly 'hopeless' – times. It has identified community workers as being perfectly placed to offer a hopeful vision to the most marginalized people in society, highlighting the role of relational practice in helping them to construct alternative visions for their own, and society's, future. This practice is built on professionally loving engagement with people, developing trust and supporting their critical understanding of the factors contributing towards their oppression, demonstrating that we can be "the strong … [and] … the trusted": the bringers of harmony (Lowe, 1974).

Specifically, the findings from the study presented here foreground the potential of *professional love* to constitute the embodiment of our love of humanity, something shown to be a necessary component of practitioners' core motivation for working with the most marginalized people in society. As one respondent put it: "My practice embodies my belief that we are all placed to create and perpetuate connection and acceptance … we are all love"; for them, community work is "the gift of holding that truth even when faced by fears and darkness and shame (ours and others)".

This paper has further "[imbued] discourse with the nomenclature of *professional love"* (Page, 2018: 129), the majority of respondents in this study seemingly comfortable with engaging in "sincere commentaries on love without fear of intellectual embarrassment" (Laurie & Stark, 2017: 69). Their contributions support the view that radical, loving community work practice is not something to be dismissed as laughable, the question at the heart of the song whose lyric shaped this paper; indeed, there is nothing "funny … about peace, love and understanding' (Lowe, 1974).

The views reflected here support the view that *professional love* can contribute towards the realization of radical hope, something that is "dangerous" for neo-liberalism "when taken seriously as a means of catalyzing social transformation" (Lake & Kress, 2017: 72). It allows for the individual to believe in themselves to the extent that they can move from acceptance of 'what is' to the enactment of 'what might be': a better, more socially and environmentally just society. Practitioners should feel emboldened by these findings to

develop our profession, embracing new ways of being and doing and – most importantly – of imagining alternative possible futures, to secure transformation in the lived experience of the most marginalized of people.

It is crucial that professionally loving practice, based on reciprocal relationships, be sustained, to imbue individuals, groups and communities with the self-belief and power to make decisions about their own needs, and how those needs should be met. Page's (2018) triadic model provides a framework within which community workers can reflect on the extent to which their relational practice is effective in helping the three parties to generate hope and progression; emphasising the need for practitioners to subject their relationships to ongoing negotiation and review.

This paper does not address all questions relating to *professional love*. While it has identified some of the component parts of professionally loving practice, there is more work to be done on explicating if *professional love* challenges the inequalities in society. Furthermore, it remains unclear as to whether the ability to practice in a professionally loving manner must be innate, or if it is something that can be learned by community workers. Linked to this, the research has touched on the potential cost to the practitioner of the emotional labour associated with working in a professionally loving manner. Nonetheless, the findings presented here demonstrate that the relationships between community workers and those marginalized groups and individuals with whom they work can be understood and organised in a different frame, one that recognises our basic human need to feel loved – or, at least, worthy of love. What this work has achieved, I hope, is to at least shine some "light in the darkness of insanity" (Lowe, 1974), and help to frame further discourse and research onto this important aspect of our practice.

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