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Displaying Social Work through Objects

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Abstract

This article examines the possibility of demonstrating social work through a collection of objects. It presents the experience of a web-based project, *Social Work in 40 Objects*, which aimed to provide an alternative approach to understanding social work—through *display* rather than definition and description. The project was experimental, with no presumption that it would be possible to express the abstraction of social work through the materiality of objects. An open, online 'donation' process successfully elicited 127 objects from people across twenty-five countries and five continents. The process by which the objects were collected is discussed, with the author cast in the role of curator of a *Virtual Exhibition* of social work. Theories from material culture and museum ethnography are introduced to understand the broader significance of *stuff*, its relevance to social work and the power of metonymy and metaphor. Examples of donated objects are used to consider their ability to convey the complexities of social work. An object typology is suggested, derived from the modes of meaning ascribed to the objects in the collection. The project uncovered the importance of the stories underpinning the objects via explanatory *plaques*, and the significance of the relationship between object, person and profession in creating *charged* objects.

Keywords: Artefacts, charged objects, material culture, professional identity, social work, stuff

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> And then the most exciting part of the opening [of the cardboard box] . . . was the attempt to find out what in particular was inside the box *aside* from all the pieces of squunched up paper . . . when that last bit of wrapping was finally undone, there would be the cup or saucer or tiny little vase . . .. And maybe if you'd seen that cup or saucer or vase just sitting on a shelf in a shop somewhere, you might have thought it was nothing in particular . . . but by the time it has been pulled out of all that paper, out of that milk-white box, out of that

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cardboard carton, it seemed like the most shining, sparkling thing in the world (Shawn, 1991, pp. 16–17).

Objet: anything which is the cause or subject of a passion (Littré's Dictionary, 1863).

Introduction

In this article, we examine the possibility of telling stories of social work via objects. We consider the process and progress of *Social Work in 40 Objects*—a web-based experimental project that elicited donations of objects to a *Virtual Exhibition* of social work, alongside accompanying narratives that connected object, donor and profession. Underpinning the project is a supposition that definitions and texts have limitations in conveying what social work is, especially to a wider public, and that social work might be better *demonstrated through display* than defined and described.

The article considers the possibility of exploring complex ideas like *the contested nature of social work* through the medium of material objects. Insights from material culture theory and museum ethnography are used to understand social work's relationship to the material world. We conclude with some tentative observations drawn from the experience of this experiment.

Material culture

Things provide clues to a person's life. During visits to service users' homes, the presence of the things that people amass around them, or their absence, tells a story. These things can provide a bridge in the conversation—'is that a photograph of your son?'; 'is that one of the chairs you were saying your mother used to make?' Indeed, these things might be the focus of the social work, as in situations where the attachment to things has become problematic, like hoarding (Anka *et al.*, 2014; Joy, 2016; Shaw *et al.*, 2016). On occasion, the social worker might introduce specific objects into the service user's home as part of the work, helping people to move things or acquire them—furniture, bedding, even as basic as food (Backwith, 2014).

Objects in the service user's realm are often taken for granted and the noting of them can serve a purpose to make the object's presence felt (Latour, 2000). A photograph might have been sitting on the side for some time and it is only when the social worker brings it to the foreground that the person is minded of its presence and its biography.

People make things, this much we know, but material culture theory asks us to consider how things make people. Miller's (2010, p. 155) view is that 'things guide us towards the appropriate way to behave'—where to sit, whether to accept a cup of tea or to ask to turn the television off. This is true for the social worker's own things, too, such as the way sharing a desk (hot-desking) affects the experience of work (Phillips, 2014). Technological objects designed to facilitate the work also shape the work itself, most clearly seen in the succession of aids to record social work—from pen and paper to typewriter to dictaphone to desk-top computer and iPad. However, there is little empirical research to shed light on whether and how the parade of these objects, one superseding the other, has shaped the practice itself (Wastell and White, 2014).

Clothes, too, constitute the material culture of social work. The significance of dress has been explored by Scholar (2013), blue denim jeans by Ferguson (2015) and the role of dress in maintaining or blurring professional boundaries by Doel and Shardlow (2005). A commonly used synecdoche—*suits*—stands for a whole tribe of people who are identified with increasing managerialism in social work. For Thomson, '*Jeans* represent the time before managerialism transformed social work into a corporatised, homogenised, de-personalised, over-regulated profession. Time for the men and women in suits to give social work back to the men and women in jeans!' (*socialworkin40objects.com*).

Can the immaterial be expressed through the material, ideas and ideals displayed via objects and artefacts?

A chest of objects

In the late eighteenth century, there was a growing social movement to abolish slavery and the slave trade. In the UK, the person most identified with abolitionism was William Wilberforce, its parliamentary champion. Less known is the work of Thomas Clarkson, who campaigned tirelessly as an abolitionist (Devenish, 1994). He gathered an array of things, which included appalling instruments of slavery, such as branding irons and shackles. He collected the spices that constituted part of the trade and, most significantly, beautiful artefacts hand-crafted by the enslaved West Africans. He displayed these objects in a chest, which he took around the country to open meetings, bringing the hideous evidence of slavery directly into people's hands; at the same time, and in direct contrast, people touched—and were touched by—the decorative, carved objects that demonstrated slaves as fellow human beings with a developed culture. Clarkson's chest of objects may have moved many more hearts and minds than Wilberforce's parliamentary words; Clarkson was the social worker to Wilberforce's lawmaker.

Clarkson's chest demonstrates a later premise of material culture theory that it is the relationship of the object to other objects and to the human world that gives meaning; it is the *system of things* that makes us who we are, and a single object has limited meaningfulness (Baudrillard, 2005/1968).

In a very different context, could a chest of objects *display* social work in a way that fine words and definitions cannot? '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' (Scholar, 2016, p. 631). What would social work's own *chest of objects* consist of, and how might they be collected?

The project begins

Commenting on an impromptu Twitter experiment asking people to nominate objects for a hypothetical social work museum, Scholar (2016, p. 633) noted that 'participants struggled to identify objects that were central to the identity and practice of social work'. This experience suggests that the idea of a museum could be too concrete and nominating a single object to identify social work too challenging. Perhaps if people participated as a community to gather an accumulation of objects—a group project rather than a singular activity—this could be more successful? In addition, would it help if there were an opportunity to recount a backstory for the object? In terms of an *Exhibition of objects*, donors could be asked to gift an object and write a 'plaque' (a brief explanation) about the object and their relationship to it through social work.

To test this supposition, a website was created—*socialworkin40objects.com.* Anybody could join in as a donor and/or witness. Donors were asked to follow four protocols:

To provide:

- a black-and-white, squared image of the object;
- some text, starting '*I chose [this object] because* ...';
- a black-and-white, squared head shot of themselves;
- some text describing themselves and their relationship to social work.

The protocols created a common structure and a unity of form within the site. Some donations came fully formed, but many started as loose ideas requiring encouragement, discussion and time to take shape. Some never materialised.

The first object will illustrate the process. Allam, currently a social worker in the field of palliative care, donated an *A–Z Birmingham street map book* from her days as a newly qualified social worker. Had this *map book* been encased in an exhibition without explanatory text,

visitors would have puzzled as to its meaning; certainly, they would need to invent their own stories about its presence and possible relationship to social work. This introspection could be instructive: objects derive their meaning as much from the viewer's interpretation as the creator's intention. In this regard, they are Caple's (2006) 'reluctant witnesses'. This ambiguity nicely reflects the uncertainties of social work (Briskman, 2013).

Visitors might not have their own *A–Z Birmingham street map*, but they can understand the significance of place and community. The *A–Z* speaks at other levels, too—for instance, the effect of changing technology on social work practice. The visitor might derive wry pleasure from the knowledge that the *A–Z* will be superseded by the satnav (GPS). The nostalgia of Allam's attachment to an artefact from her newly qualified days is something many others can share and conjure their own *equivalent objects*—those that mirror the meanings and feelings evoked by this visibly thumbed *A–Z*. The miles and years travelled by this particular *A–Z* are a significant part of its being, and Allam's own story attached to the object gives it a *charge*—a notion to which we will return.

The *A–Z book* reflects facets of social work—its rootedness in community, its relationship to technology, a metaphor for the holistic nature of social work, encompassing everything from A to Z. However, as noted earlier, a single object has limited meaning. Slowly, others added to the collection; once it achieved a tipping point of a dozen or so items, an 'inspiration effect' seemed to enable potential donors to realise the possibilities in their own inchoate ideas. Objects were donated with increasing frequency (five in one day at the peak, three months into the project). Potential participants who had been stymied by their notion that social work had to be 'represented' in a single object saw a collection of objects building where it was possible to present a facet of social work. This process can be understood via the metaphor of a collage: recognisable from a distance as a single person, close up it is composed of small headshots of hundreds of different people. So, up close it is an *A–Z*, but, as part of a bigger collection, it becomes 'social work'. Perhaps the discipline of the four protocols mirrors the four equal sides of the squares in this metaphorical collage, each of which has to respect the protocol in order for the full picture to work.

What is an object?

Some of the objects that were donated quite early in the experiment fell well outside the archetypal *objectness* that I had, unwittingly, constructed for myself. Phung's *Chinese bowl* achieved this objectness: something capable of being touched and, if sufficiently venerable, handled with white gloves. A rethink of objectness was prompted by donations like *Eyes*,

Songs, *Real-life library* and *Bella*, a dog that had lived in a children's home in the 1950s. Many objects straddled the material and the immaterial, and were the more interesting for that. It became apparent that the ambiguity of the objects *as objects* was congruent with the ambiguity of social work, and therefore more aligned to the reality than the artifice of, say, a tight definition (IFSW/IASSW, 2014). The telling of the object's biography and its relationship to the donor emerged as a further parallel process with social work—one through which voice is given to people's stories. However, the irony of these considerations of materiality is the fact that none of the objects in the project was solid—they were photographic images in a virtual exhibition. As such, objects that would not be possible in a real display (Prinsloo's *Eyes*, Fautrat's *The Falcon*) were made possible.

At the start of the experiment, I was curious how universal the potential collection of objects could be. Material culture theory suggests that the idea of an object in itself might be a Western construct (Baudrillard, 2005/1968). Opening the experiment to a global audience tested not just the cultural specificity of objects, but also the notion of *objectness.* Certainly, the choice of available objects is greater in industrial societies; respondents in a study in Niger needed prompts to name an object that was significant for them, and then the most commonly named was 'the field' (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Mehta and Belk (1991) found that people in India identified objects that increased the prestige of their families rather than their individual self. Even in Western societies with a plethora of things, their 'humility' means that they are often overlooked (Miller, 1986). However, an object donated by Ekanele, a newly qualified Nigerian social worker, firmed the hope that the project could cross cultural borders and that a single object could transcend the specific to speak to the universal, whilst retaining the strength of its particularness. Ekanele donated *lleke ibile* (Yoruba for traditional bead), because it is worn in his Nigerian village by the elders, whose role he likens to social work:

> The traditional leaders meet the social needs of the villagers and also deal with problematic behaviours in the village and find solutions. Today, I see social workers as wearing the *Ileke ibile*, one which cannot be physically seen or observed. To me, the social work profession *is* the Traditional bead (*socialworkin40objects.com*).

IIeke ibile successfully transitions from the particularity of these beads in this village in Nigeria to universal notions of authority and leadership relevant not just to the Nigerian village, but to the professionalised social work that has developed in the West. Ekanele is using *Ileke ibile* as metonymy, in the way *crown* can be employed to refer to power in place of using 'king'. *Jeans* were similarly used metonymically, as we saw earlier.

Many participants in the experiment chose to donate artefacts that quite deliberately referenced their own cultural milieu: for example, Rotari's *Trypillian spiral*, the pattern found on artefacts from an ancient Moldovan civilisation (*socialworkin40objects.com*). Of course, *all* the objects reflected their local context, but those objects that could move the visitor between the particular and the universal proved especially powerful. This movement between specificity and generality is central to material culture theory (Miller, 2010).

Charged objects and identity

A bone fragment is found in the soil of an archaeological dig. It is carefully brushed and cleaned, identified and catalogued, then displayed in a major exhibition, where it takes central position in a protective perspex case, an explanatory plaque carefully stencilled onto the wall. In this process, it has become a *charged* object (Morin, 1969)—a process that the director of the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris, Yves Winkin (2018), traces as the 'deaths and resurrections of objects'.

Individuals have their own charged objects—a teddy bear that has survived from infancy, a hat owned by a deceased parent, an ornament whose biography traces their own. Cauvain described the journey of a *Mouthpiece* from a functional part of a French horn to the only remaining belonging of his estranged father (*socialworkin40objects.com*). His father tragically died just weeks after their reunion; to add to the distress, his father's flat was burgled the day of his death and the only remaining reminder for Cauvain was the mouthpiece to his father's precious instrument. It is a moving story—one made the sharper by the focus on a single object, the *Mouthpiece*, and by Cauvain's subsequent use of metonymy to connect the object to social work. In the process, this ordinary small piece of metal gathers a *charge*—an example of objects that 'do more and mean more than they might be supposed to' (Connor, 2013, p. 3).

Whereas the objects we have discussed earlier, like *Ileke ibile* and *Jeans*, are classes of objects—there are many examples of traditional beads, innumerable pairs of jeans (Miller and Woodward, 2012)—Cauvain's *Mouthpiece* is a singular object. There are many French-horn mouthpieces in the world, but only this one belonged to his father. If we were to visit an actual Exhibition of Social Work, we would expect to see *that mouthpiece* displayed, not any mouthpiece. Its charge derives from its being *the* object.

Objects like teddy bears assist the infant's transition into the world-that-is-not-me (Winnicott, 1953) and continuous ownership of belongings aids the acquisition of a working sense of one's own personal persistence in time (Chandler *et al.*, 2003). The loss of objects can harm the sense of

personal identity, especially in relation to children in care: ‘With such frequent changes of environment, material possessions may become particularly important as they have the potential to offer one of the few points of consistency in lives that are characterised by transience’ (Ward, 2011, p. 2515).

Are there professional ‘belongings’, then, that help secure a profession’s identity over time? The role of ‘stuff’ has been explored in the development of professional medical legitimacy (Fiol and O’Connor, 2006), referencing the stethoscope in particular (Rice, 2010). In nursing, the transmission of ‘tactile knowing’ through gels and gloves has been analysed by Pink *et al.* (2014). The place of objects and materiality to fix a social work identity and legitimacy is relatively unexplored, though Ferguson (2015) and Scholar (2013) have considered the significance of dress.

A number of the objects in the project were donated because of their longevity and the persistent identity they bestowed. Phung’s *Chinese bowl*, referenced earlier, has been in his family for many generations:

> It reminds me of my identity as a first generation immigrant living in Britain. The sense of being alien is what I will always carry with me; and I value working cross-culturally as it enables me to bridge the cultural divide. In social work this gives me a valued perspective on what it feels to be an ‘outsider’ as often the service users I work with are also ‘outsiders’ in their own culture, marginalised by social exclusion. For me, knowing the language of alienation is a gift in social work (Doel, 2017, *Social Work at Table collection*).

Slesser donated a painted plaster model of *Postman Pat* (a television character for children) made twenty-five years ago by her son when he was five years old. This model has followed her from post to post, standing guard on her work desk, and serving as a continuing reminder of the tension between the ‘mum space’ in her head for her own sons and the space for the children in her professional care (*socialworkin40objects.com*). The persistent presence of this delicate model (it has been broken and mended) is a tangible reminder of the challenges of her dual identity, as mother and social worker, and probably a more effective motivator to self-care than any organisational list of tips.

During the sectarian troubles in Northern Ireland, Heery was given a wooden *Crib*, handmade by Peter, one of his probation clients. For most of the year, it is stored away, emerging each Christmas when Heery decorates it and gives it pride of place. Peter died of alcohol abuse, the *Crib* endures. It signifies the potential violence of identity politics, the tortuous peace process and the need for social workers ‘to find ways to work with all sections of our society [.] in imaginative and creative ways, seeking to contribute to peace and reconciliation’ (in Doel, 2017, *Gifts and Mementoes collection*). *Crib* conjures a brave, even noble, identity

for social work, transcending narrow sectarian allegiances. It speaks to reciprocity in social work relationships—the *Crib* is, first and foremost, a gift from a client.

Many of the objects donated to the Exhibition relate in some way to identity, sometimes a lost identity, such as Marsh's *Patch office door* from the 1970s—a time when British social services were organised in local neighbourhoods ('patches'). Other objects proved to be the catalyst that propelled the individual into identification with social work, like Fautrat's *The Falcon* (a cartoon character from his boyhood). Service users construct an identity for themselves in The Unity Group's *Selfie*, and Shennon's *Riad's identity card* speaks to the exclusion of people *because* of their identity, in this case a Palestinian social worker (*socialworkin40objects.com*).

Unlike medicine's stethoscope or surgery's scalpel, a single symbolic object is not possible for social work, nor desirable. However, this experiment shows that a complex professional identity can be demonstrated when a *collection* of objects is gathered from a diverse group of people.

Complex ideas demonstrated through objects

Food comprises a collection of basic foodstuffs you would find in any food bank. Sokhela writes:

> Throughout my career in social work serving humanity, I have witnessed and worked with people living in abject poverty, need, want and social exclusion, and one of the direst needs is a basic commodity: food. It is estimated that 12 million people live in extreme poverty in my country, South Africa. Against that background, I decided to own our poverty and do something about it. Social work is about *owning* the community's problems and acting on them (Doel, 2017, *Social Work at Table collection*).

This is a controversial account of social work. It illustrates a number of tensions, not least what it means to be professional and to act professionally. Is this an example of highly committed social work, or of over-identification? Each person who views the stock of *Food* and reads Sokhela's words takes their own meanings from it: a rallying call to stand shoulder to shoulder with service users and their communities in their struggles; a warning of the dangers of getting too close to the people social workers work with; a reminder of the troubling gap between many social workers and the communities with which they work; an image of a social work so distant from the experience of many bureau professionals that it is unrecognisable. Whichever viewpoint is taken, *Food* requires a consideration of social work's relationship to the politics of redistribution and class (Harvey, 2013).

Over the last few decades, *redistribution* has been overshadowed by *recognition*, also referred to as the politics of identity (Gergen, 1995).

The interplay of identity and redistributive politics is illustrated by the issue of pay differentials: which is the greater wrong—the gap between the top pay of men and the top pay of women or the distance between top paid people and those on zero-hour contracts at the bottom? (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

We have noted *Food* in relation to a social work of redistribution. Similarly, there are objects in the collection that reference identity, 'a social work of recognition': amongst these are *Court hat* (gender), *Crib* (sectarian), *Dalek* (disability), *Drum* (race), *Riad's identity card* (religious and national), *Selfie* (service user identity), *Traffic sign* (age) and *Vinyl* (sexual identity), as well as *Chinese bowl* (cultural), already noted (*socialworkin40objects.com* for details).

The complexity of the social work of redistribution and the social work of recognition is one component in the larger notion of social work as 'contested' (Hugman, 2009; Doel, 2012; Jönsson, 2015). As curator of this experimental virtual exhibition, I wondered whether the material reality of objects might demonstrate these complexities in a way that is more accessible than definitions and texts. Whilst text seeks to develop *understanding via explanation*, objects seem capable of evoking a different kind of *contact through display and demonstration*.

Bricolage

The experiment was a quantitative success: in the first six months, 127 objects were donated from twenty-four countries across five continents; when the project was initiated, it was by no means certain that *any* objects would be proposed. Once the collection became large (say, at the point of forty donations), a systematic thematic analysis could have been used to cluster objects around common themes, like self-care and burnout, professional boundaries, safeguarding issues, etc. (Padgett, 2017). However, when considering how the objects might be displayed in their entirety, it felt true to the spirit of the experiment to regard the objects *qua* objects. This meant looking to their inherent material properties and functions in order to gather them into various collections. The objects were uploaded to the website in the random order of donation but, as curator of the Exhibition, I played at *bricolage*—a process of improvisation to see what might be made from a diverse range of things (Turkle, 2007; Kay, 2016; Lea French and Williamson, 2016). This allowed a playful approach to clustering objects as they might be displayed in a physical exhibition, where sub-sets of objects are viewed as themed *collections* within the overall exhibition.

Tinkering in this way, and using the material nature of the objects as a guide, twelve collections were derived from their properties. For instance, the *Fabric of social work* collection is composed of eight cloth/textile

objects that include Ward's *Foundling hospital token* (a strip of fabric), Barillot's *School bag* (woven wickerware) and Govė's *Lappieskombers* (tapestry quilt). Some collections were influenced by the function of the object, such as those connected to transport in the *Social work on the move* collection, or music in the *Sounds of social work* collection, which included Cauvain's *Mouthpiece*.

A thirteenth collection emerged from eleven objects brought together because of their strongly opposing utopian and dystopian outlooks on social work. Vyšniauskyė-Rimkienė's *Candle* brings hope and light to a person's life, in a utopian vision of social work:

> When people have dark times and crises in their lives, often everything can seem lost, without any possible solutions. It is the social worker who can enlighten, help people to look around and discover the possibility that there are so many different ways to see yourself, your family and the world
>
> (Doel, 2017, *Utopia/Dystopia collection*).

In contrast, Palmer's *Dalek* speaks to the immense challenge of putting the social model of disability into practice in her work as a prison-based social worker for disabled prisoners: Daleks, science fiction aliens who destroyed all in their path, could not climb stairs. This dystopian vision of social work in the twenty-first century runs deeper than the unaccommodating prison environment and includes the resistance from other people in the prison whose co-operation Palmer needs to make necessary changes:

> 'Dalek epitomises the frustrations of the job ... of working with people who "don't agree with disabled prisoners getting special treatment"'
>
> (Doel, 2017, *Utopia/Dystopia collection*).

Dalek is a reminder of the power of social work and the fact that it is not always benign.

A typology of objects

Some objects are important as artefacts in their own right. Ward's *Foundling hospital token*, already mentioned, bears witness to the loss and separation of mothers and their children in eighteenth-century England. The token, left by a mother in the happenstance that she could return to be reunited with her child (identifiable only by the token), exists as an object of venerable age in London's Foundling Museum. It acquires its charge from its physical presence and from the resonance of its symbolic meaning—loss, grief and poverty, for the reasons that led to the separation of mother and child were invariably economic.

The significance of other objects lies in their content, not their physical existence. For instance, the *Beveridge Report* (1942), donated by

Dominelli, is important because of the report's vision and its implications for universal social services in the UK. The physical copy of the report, as an object in its own right, is not significant except for its possible rarity value.

In reviewing all 127 objects donated to the Exhibition, six types were elicited according to the mode of meaning implied in the donation of the object:

1. *Metaphorical objects* illustrate social work by comparing similar characteristics and making parallels between the object and a facet of social work, such as *Candle* and *Dalek*, already referenced. Many of the objects in the project are used in this symbolic way. This mode can be illuminating, but 'the focus on the symbolic qualities of objects can mean that other aspects of the relationship between objects and social life can be overlooked' (Scholar, 2016, p. 638). Govan's bottle of *Coca-Cola* was donated to illustrate aspects of social work ('calm and still until activated, but then capable of great fizz'), but this object lacks the hard materiality of Parton's *Hammer*, which was used by a service user to threaten a social worker, 'reminding me of the need for courage in social work and how this quality tends to be underestimated' (*socialworkin40objects.com*). Student social workers were especially prone to donating metaphorical objects, perhaps because their 'lofts' had not yet started accumulating artefacts from their own direct practice.
2. *Metaphysical objects* do not exist as material objects, but are construed in order to illuminate a core element of what social work is or ought to be. For instance, Dow's *Real-life library* is an attempt to conceptualise what is often called lived experience and a recognition of service users as 'experts by experience' (Mclaughlin, 2010; Cooke *et al.*, 2015). Dow borrows the notion of a physical library as a repository of accumulated knowledge, and distils it into an idea. A real-life library does not 'exist' in the material world but, as an idea in the mind's eye, it is a powerful thing.
3. *Personal objects* from an individual's own history with social work can be especially charged because there is every possibility that the visitor has that object or a similar one. Even if that particular object's facsimile is not available, the storyline that makes it an object of interest can have parallels with the visitor's own stories, such as the *A–Z* and *Postman Pat*, discussed earlier.
4. *Socio-political objects* demonstrate the link between social work and the broader socio-political context. Social work has grown up as a holistic profession, concerned with the whole person in the context of their family, community and society.

This uniquely broad remit has been a strength and a weakness, though specialisation has tended to clip the holistic nature of practice. Objects like Hollows's *Grey blanket* given to migrants and refugees who have landed soaking wet on a Greek island make direct reference to the political nature of social work, to the bond between the personal, the professional and the political (David, 2003). As we have seen, *Food* is a plea to social workers to live, work and *be* their communities; a food bank powerfully displays the impact of poverty on the people with whom social workers work and it makes a demand of the visitor: *where do you stand?*

5. *Historical objects* mark the development of social work through time. Artefacts like Ward's *Foundling hospital token* and Moldovan's *Jane Addams' coat* most resemble the convention of a museum object. This group of objects was relatively small in number and the larger part of them were documentary, such as Whiting's *1974 Social Services budget* illustrating the effects of the reforms brought about by the Seebohm Report in England and Wales (1968). An alternative way of examining social work's history is to consider the archives of a single agency: like the stratifications in a slice of rock, they tell a story of social work in one place through time (Daly and Ballantyne, 2009; Chambon *et al.*, 2011).
6. *Practical objects* are those used in direct work. In some professions, practical objects abound, like the stethoscope in medicine (Rice, 2010). Social work's heavy reliance on communication skills—listening, observing, talking—perhaps explains the relative lack of such objects in the collection. However, Suwali's *Drum* is an example of how a person's cultural, personal and professional identities can be fused into a creative practice (*socialworkin40objects.com*).

The *humility of things*

Miller's (1986) notion of *the humility of things* suggests we are likely oblivious to the everyday objects in social work. Scholar (2016, p. 645) noted that 'While artefacts are but one aspect of the material world, we might benefit by taking more notice of them, making them visible, paying attention to our relationship with them' to realise their participation in our professional practice. For instance, the *Dictaphone* prescribed the '50-minute hour' for my early practice with service users, as I needed five to ten minutes to record between each home visit. Also, I vividly remember my introduction to the *Scannex* file system on my first day in a social services department. Clients' files slotted into a circle of rotating

metal grips, one carousel of perhaps 100 files circulating above another. Scannex files would house my reports and recordings over the next two decades—the only material, lasting testament to the ephemera of all those social work encounters, although, in fact, not so enduring, as I am sure they have all long gone. I retain one surviving Scannex file—an object so humbly everyday in the 1970s that no one would have noticed it, but now resurrected as the last of its kind.

Another object seldom regarded as such is the car. It is significant as an object that can be a space for work (Smith, 2003; Ferguson, 2010) and a 'closed realm of intimacy' (Baudrillard, 2005/1968, p. 71). In 'donating' her own *Car*, Pickard described it as her world, acting as a kind of office—a safe place and a space in which direct work with service users takes place: 'It's vital to doing my job' (*socialworkin40objects.com*). It was the car that made possible my practice of immediate dictaphone recording.

Everyday objects can wake up once the social work gaze is turned on them:

> For many years I had a tin hat and a magic wand blu-tacked to the top of my computer. The tin hat was often needed (especially but not exclusively at team meetings) and the magic wand reminded me that it's what service users often wanted (a magic solution) but there isn't one—the wand is just a piece of coloured plastic. Actually a service user gave it to me
>
> (Jill Palmer, personal correspondence, 2018).

If one wanted to narrow the criteria for stuff, the desks of social workers would be a good place to start. The objects found there are the modern equivalent of the *lares*—the domestic household gods enshrined in Roman homes. What is Slesser's *Postman Pat* if not a household god for modern times.

Some conclusions

40 Objects was an experimental project, evolutionary in nature, its only tentative starting premise being that social work might be demonstrated by a display of objects and that these acts of demonstration could evoke meanings that are qualitatively different from definition and description. If '40' had been an aspirational target, the reality of 127 donations was a quantitative success; but what qualitative conclusions may be ventured?

The open approach to searching for objects elicited a diverse range of donations that are capable of telling a comprehensive story of social work and demonstrating its contested nature. In particular, when the object, the person and the profession become fused into one story, that object attracts a special *charge*. We can think of these charged objects as those likely to have their own display cases in a physical exhibition.

Inviting the Exhibition's visitors to make their own sense of the objects on display has value, but the donor's expository 'plaque' is a necessary narrative. The context in which the object is gifted to the collection and the donor's social work biography are significant when constructing meanings. There is evidence that service users, too, can use objects to construct their meaning of social work, as in the *Jewellery* made specifically for the project by a group of service users with learning difficulties. Perhaps the active use of objects—*Object work*—might be worthy of development as a method of practice.

Of all the professional and public services, social work is one of the most private. There are tentative indications from this project that public awareness of social work could be improved through a display, 'a chest of objects', though further enquiry is needed. Demonstrating social work through objects and the narratives that attach to them crosses national and cultural borders: the project has 'toured' to twenty venues in six different countries, where it has been well received and has sparked 'pop-up exhibitions' offering further objects and their social work stories. The aspiration is that such displays could cross the borders between the social work profession and public perceptions.

Postscript

Visiting Aberdeen, I took the opportunity to see *Postman Pat* in person. I had passed this desk on other occasions prior to the *40 Objects* project, and never noticed 'Patrick' (Slesser's name for him), illustrating the notion of the humility of objects. How different this occasion was. At first, I was surprised that the model was much smaller than I thought, and frankly a little tatty. It had been broken and mended. But it had attained the status of a *charged* object and thus I felt a special privilege in seeing and handling Patrick in person—on this occasion without white gloves.

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