What is a person? Deepening students' and colleagues' understanding of person-centredness

Monica Short, Karen Dempsey, Janice Ackland, Emma Rush, Eric Heller & Helen Dwyer

Monica Short, Karen Dempsey, Janice Ackland & Emma Rush – School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University
Eric Heller – Research & Information, Juvenile Justice NSW, Department of Justice
Helen Dwyer – The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne

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Address for Correspondence:

mshort@csu.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

What is a person? This article deepens students', field educators' and colleagues' understanding of person-centred and other personalisation approaches. A group of field educators and academics observed students' tendency to apply personalisation approaches in their field education tasks and supervision sessions without reference to the person receiving the intervention. In response, the field educators began conversing about personhood, personalisation approaches and field education with colleagues from philosophy, chaplaincy, theology and sociology. A cross-disciplinary investigation between the university, field educators and the field emerged leading to this co-operative inquiry into the question: "What is a person?" This inquiry considers contemporary personhood debates and how such debates can influence field education. Personalisation approaches are considered capable of grounding students', field educators' and professionals' theoretical knowledge in reality by ensuring that they listen to the person they are working with and that they provide that person with agency, power, control and choice over their life. This article invites students, field educators and colleagues to engage with contemporary discussions about personhood and how they apply to field education. It hopes to invigorate their application of personalisation approaches within the human services sector by arguing for a clear reference to the person receiving assistance.

INTRODUCTION

A disconnect has been observed among contemporary social scientists and students on placement: they sometimes refer to person-centred or other personalisation approaches without defining the word "person." When personalisation discourses are used without reference to the actual person receiving the service, a lack of understanding of the significance of personhood becomes apparent in students' field education, professionals' practice and theoretical literature. We consider field education to be a crucial moment in professional development, one which provides a unique opportunity to address this problem.

Given the deficiency in the theoretical literature, we pursued a cross-disciplinary co-operative inquiry into the question: "What is a person?" Such questions can inspire the social sciences to move from objectifying those they are working with, to forming a closeness with people. This, in turn, allows a more authentic[1] interpretation of situations (Swinton, 2012, p. 136).

This is important because it shifts the power in decision making from the people providing services to the people receiving them (Sanderson & Lewis, 2012, p. 20) and it challenges disempowering practices like calling people clients rather than by their names (Chetty, Dalrymple, & Simmons, 2012; Community Care, 2008). Personalisation approaches, such as the person-centred approach, can be defined as a person-in-environment perspective that values people's independence and rights; emphasises tailored services, co-production, choice and control in service delivery; and facilitates the inclusion of all in groups, communities and society (National Association of Social Workers, 2013, pp. 8, 17, 18; Sanderson & Lewis, 2012, p. 24). When personalisation approaches (often an essential component of field education) are utilised within a multidisciplinary context – a deep understanding of personhood can be realised. The purpose of this research is to clarify the ambiguity around *personhood* within field education environments using dialogue between the fields of social work, sociology, philosophy, chaplaincy and theology and with additional reference to the approach of Non-violent Communication.

This field education inquiry into personhood is important for two reasons. First, historically, when cultural and individualistic discourses dehumanise people, this has led to abusive practice; for example, the forced removal of babies with mixed heritage from Indigenous mothers in Australia. We challenge such discourses in this article. Second, this inquiry partially addresses a deficiency in the literature relating to person-centred approaches to practice and, in particular, field education that fails to reference the person on whom the approaches are centred or focused.

Engaging with the literature

This multidisciplinary literature review demonstrates how concepts of personhood have developed over millennia in the areas of philosophy, theology and chaplaincy (Patterson, 2016, p. 12), and have more recently been expanded and critiqued by newer disciplines, including sociology, psychology and social work. The perspectives on the person in each of these six disciplines can bring additional depth to personalisation practices in the field such as in field education. This literature review narrowly focuses on the major currents within Western thinking in these disciplines.

Philosophy

The beginning of Western philosophy is generally dated to the era of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle (c. 469–322 BC), when rationality – the capacity to reason – was identified as the defining human quality (Garvey & Stangroom, 2012). However, the term *persons* is usually associated with Kant (1724–1804), who defined it with respect to the human capacity for free will and moral responsibility as well as rationality (Audi, 2016). For Kant, moral laws were universal and a person was an end in themselves—never only a means to other ends (Audi, 2016). These themes are visible in the modern Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948).

The post-Kantian split into analytic (or Anglo-American) philosophy and Continental (or European) philosophy resulted in sharply different approaches to personhood. Analytic philosophy focused on the *objective* features of human beings (Chase & Reynolds, 2011), defining personhood in terms of capacities, consistent with the earlier Kantian focus on moral agents (i.e., human beings capable of moral action). This overlooked the fact that all human beings might have moral status without being moral agents. In contrast, Continental philosophy focused on the *subjective* qualities of human beings (Chase & Reynolds, 2011), recognising each person's unique perspective on the world and the centrality of relationships to our understanding of ourselves.

Theology

Theology does not aspire to be philosophy; however, parts of theology are undertaken of necessity in a philosophical mode (Hauerwas, 2015, p. 259). For example, Greek philosophy provided some of the tools utilised by the early Christian church when addressing epistemological questions (Bosch, 2010, p. 200). Theology is the study of the divine and of associated religious traditions. Christian theology began during the lifetime of Jesus Christ, during the first century AD, and it explores the world via the "light of what has been done through Jesus' life, death and resurrection" (Hauerwas, 2015, p. 259). Christian theology is concerned with truth (Barth, 2017, p. 11) and is interested in finding Christian answers to human problems and questions within a cultural context (Hiebert, 2004, p. 211). In exploring "what is a person?," theologian Aquinas argued (following Gen 1:26–27, James 3:9 *New International Version*) that all individuals are made in the image of God and are members of the human species because they come from human parents (Romero, 2012, pp. 102, 104). Cameron (2014, pp. 35–36) stated people are people because they are known by God, while for Bonhoeffer every human being was to be treated as a person simply because of their membership of the human race (Wannenwetsch, 2012, p. 360).

Chaplaincy

The concepts of personhood found in contemporary chaplaincy originate from Biblical and associated theological texts, as well as from multi-faith and no-faith pastoral care knowledge. From a Christian perspective, persons are inescapably spiritual beings, with intrinsic worth, as "to be a member of the human race" is to be a person (Swinton, 2012, p. 156). According to Kitwood (2007), personhood is "a standing or a status that is bestowed on one human being, by another in the context of relationship and social being" (p. 8).

An understanding of personhood is pivotal in any discussion about spiritual care, especially for people who are most vulnerable to being attributed a lesser value because of frailty, disability, dementia or socially prescribed disadvantage or marginalisation. According to Kitwood (2007), personhood is sacred and unique; every person has an ethical status and should be treated with deep respect. This is illustrated in a poem by Barbara Noon, a woman with dementia.

Burning Bright
Sometimes I picture myself
Like a candle.
I used to be a candle about eight feet tall-
burning bright.
Now every day I lose a little bit of me.
Someday the candle will be
very small.
But the flame will be
just as bright.

(Noon, 2003, as cited in Killock, 2006, p. 75)

Sociology

Sociology complements chaplaincy's understanding of persons as fundamentally relational. Sociology developed out of late 18th-century efforts to study human societies in a rigorous, analytical way. Foundational thinkers included Durkheim, Marx and Weber (Buechler, 2011), all of whom were trying to understand the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation: how did people experience these processes? Acknowledgement of the iterative relationship between individual human beings and social structures is central to sociological thought: human individuals both construct social structures and are constructed by them. However, the degree of agency the individual has within these processes remains an area for sociological debate (Buechler, 2011). Concepts of personhood are themselves social constructions and are analysed by sociologists as such, with attentiveness to their social and political implications. Recent work considers personhood in relation to social media, race, the family and chronic illness (Lupton, 2015; Ramos-Zyas, 2012; McCarthy, 2012; Williams, 2010).

Humanistic psychology: Non-violent Communication

Whereas sociology focuses primarily on the structures around the person, psychology focuses primarily on the person within the structures. Non-violent communication (NVC), developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg (1934–2015), offers the practitioner awareness and skills to deepen relationships, resolve conflict and help to identify the socio-political and ideological structures that underpin processes of depersonalisation and dehumanisation (Centre for NonViolent Communication, 2016). Socio-political *power over* or *domination* systems, prevalent for the past 8–10,000 years in Western culture, sustain power by creating ideologies (dominant stories) regarding the moral, racial, cultural, religious or other inferiority of particular groups of people and their behaviour (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 150; 2015, p. 23). Rosenberg called such ideologies *life-alienating thinking* and noted that, over time, such

thinking becomes deeply entrenched in unconsciously held negative beliefs concerning particular human characteristics (Rosenberg, 2015, p. 195). This life-alienating thinking and language underpin the processes of depersonalisation and dehumanisation that are at the core of all forms of abuse and violence (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 17).

The NVC model aims to distinguish between subjective judgements and objective observations, and to raise awareness of unmet needs rather than attributing blame or fault in conflict situations (Rosenberg, 2015, pp. 26–28). A pathway of self-responsibility and awareness in relationships is outlined that honours the value and dignity of every person (Rosenberg, 2012; 2015, p. 57).

Social work

Social work originated in European and North American humanitarian, philosophical and religious attempts to solve poverty and injustice (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2007, p. 4). Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2014). The profession has positioned itself as a bastion upholding the ideal that "every human being has a unique and inherent equal worth"; the dignity of all people is foundational to social work practice (British Association of Social Workers, 2014, p. 5). Social work interventions occur at the 'level of the person' (IFSW, 2014), "where people interact with their environments" (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010, p. 7). Social workers and students, when undertaking field education activities, are committed to providing person-centred care using anti-oppressive principles which embody a person-centred philosophy to eliminate discrimination and oppression (AASW, 2010, pp. 19, 41).

In social work literature, understanding of what constitutes a person or a human being appears often to be assumed, as these terms are consistently used without specific definition. For example, the social work literature, without qualifying these terms for the social work context, refers to "human well-being" and "human rights" (IFSW, 2014), "human welfare" (Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2004), "persons' physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity" (ANZASW, 2007, p. 18), "people in need" (National Association of Social Workers South Africa, 2012) and "respect for persons" (AASW, 2010, p. 12). This article aims to partially address this gap in the literature by critiquing different concepts of personhood in relation to social work and welfare field education.

METHODOLOGY

This research used a co-operative inquiry approach. This is a participatory, experiential, reflective and action-oriented research approach that focuses on writing *with* people rather than *about* people (Jones-Mutton, Short, Bidgood & Jones, 2015, p. 86; Reason, 2002). It is compatible with the ideal that theory and practice are mutually informative and related (Jones-Mutton et al., 2015, p. 86). An inquiry collects people to form a focus group with each member being a co-author, co-inquirer, co-participant, co-subject and co-researcher (Healy, Tillotson, Short & Hearn, 2015, p. 1092). As each participant is both author and researcher, risk is negligible so no ethics approval was necessary.

A co-operative inquiry is empirical by nature and allows researchers to engage with propositional, practical, experiential and presentational epistemologies (Tillotson, Short, Ollerton, Hearn, & Sawatzky, 2017, p. 322; Heron & Reason, 2008). Consequently, an inquiry respects both the practice wisdom and experience of each author and facilitates the sharing of their knowledge about the field of investigation (Short & Healy 2017). Practice wisdom is that knowledge that combines a researcher's own values with their professional or personal knowledge and experience (Samson, 2014). The research was initiated through a critically reflexive and reflective exercise that facilitated the collection of the participants' demographic data.

The participants

Six people participated in this project: five females and one male. All were over 35 years old and all had tertiary qualifications. One person was Aboriginal, five people were born in Australia and one person was born overseas. Four of the six participants supervise social work students on placements and two mark field education assessment tasks.

Eric: *I have managed a number of social work students' placements in our workplace and I [bring] a number of perspectives, sociology, theology, policing, justice, air force… I am very interested in social justice.*

Emma: *I co-teach social work students and [my background is] philosophy, English Literature and French. Personhood is there in everything I teach.*

Helen: *[I am an Anglican] priest in [Australia] … with an Indigenous identity … My identity is bound in Christ but also in land and belonging. This influences … my understanding of what is a person.*

Janice: *I am a social worker. I work as an external educator providing supervision for students on placements. I have also worked in chaplaincy. I have experience working in the fields of aged care, disability and justice. I am passionate about this topic.*

Karen: *I am a social worker. I work as an external educator and field education liaison. I have been studying and exploring non-violence and deep ecology … This interest was triggered by my personal reaction to the Cronulla riots and people expressing hatred and anger towards people they did not know.*

Monica: *I am a social worker and a Christian. I teach field education. … Social work historically has been involved in supporting stolen generation practices and the placing of people into abusive institutions … I think we need to take time to consider deeply who the* person we are working with is ... *Placement is a great time to reflect on questions like this.*

We have diverse opinions, which are still evolving, about personhood, including its relationship to field education. We decided not to aim for consensus about the topic, but rather to listen to each other.

The research phases

A co-operative inquiry cycles through four phases (Short & Healy, 2017; see Figure 1).
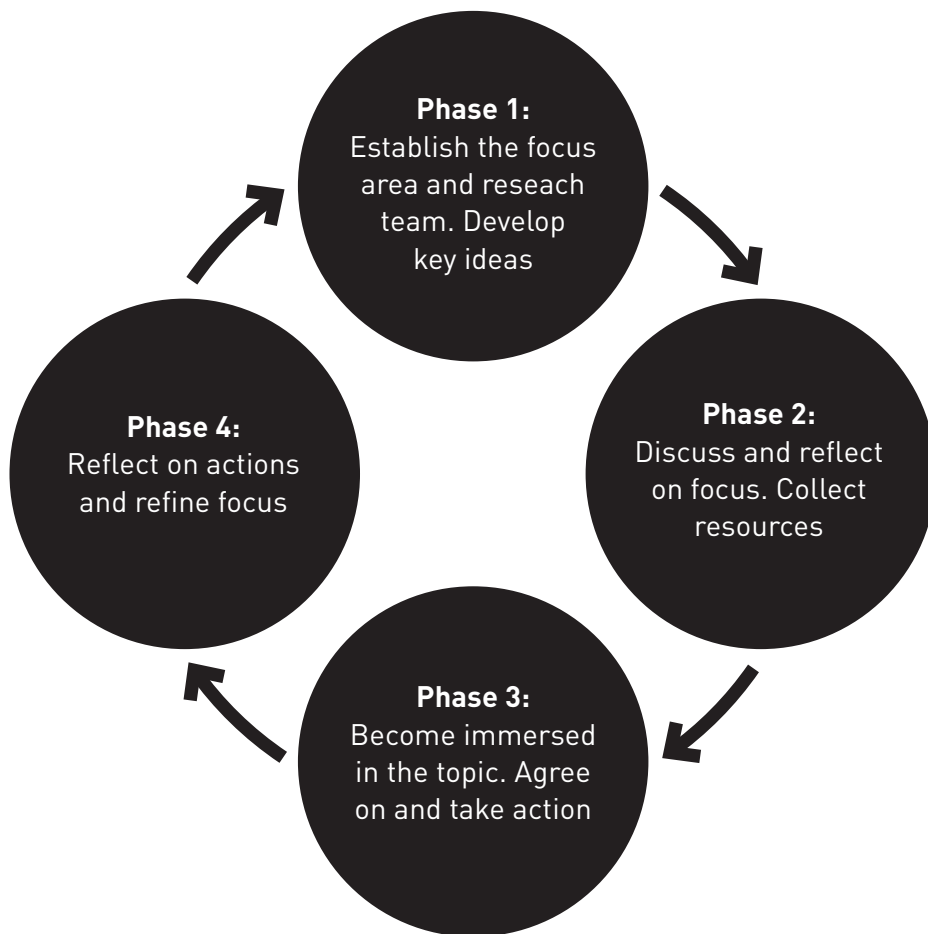

Figure 1. Co-operative inquiry phases (Short & Healy, 2017, p. 190)

In Phase 1, an inquiry group is established and a focus area, which is the field being investigated, is agreed upon and the research question is formed (Reason & Heron, 2013). Our inquiry connected six researchers from five disciplines (chaplaincy, philosophy, sociology, social work and theology) and facilitated a field education investigation into the question "what is a person?"

Phase 2 involves reflecting on and discussing the focus area, collecting resources, deciding on and initiating actions, and recording the information (Reason & Heron, 2013). We met weekly via phone to share narratives, ideas, experiences and literature. Between meetings, we communicated via email. Minutes were taken at each meeting and these minutes became our data.

In Phase 3, the inquirers as the subjects are fully immersed in the inquiry (Reason & Heron, 2013). In our inquiry, we began to see personhood from the perspective of other disciplines and to apply our new knowledge to the teaching of field education. We returned to our meetings with stories about how our research was informing or challenging our practice and teaching.

Phase 4 involves reflecting on actions and refining them, reviewing the research question and looking for gaps in the discussion (Reason & Heron, 2013; Short & Healy 2017). We noted that our initial discussion focused on abuse, injustice and social exclusion. We cycled repeatedly through the inquiry phases, refocusing our discussion on respect for personhood, social justice and social inclusion. We continued cycling through the co-operative inquiry phases until finalising this article.

LAUNCHING THE FIELD EDUCATION RESEARCH PROJECT

In recent decades, there have been calls for theoretical paradigms that inform the social work and welfare professions and education to engage thoughtfully with personhood. These calls also advocate genuinely respecting each person's unique dignity and not invalidating any person's right to agency through scientism (i.e., the idea that only science can give the ultimate truth about reality) (Battye & Slee, 1985). For example, Battye and Slee challenged:

These social workers want to be scientists, to be accountable, to be honest, all of which are laudable aspirations; the nature and implications of this increasing emphasis on empirically grounded practice for an understanding of human beings as persons has not been fully addressed by the social work profession. (1985, p. 23)

This inquiry responds to this call, as well as dialogues with other disciplines about personhood and its importance to field education.

Australian field education is a significant part of social work education (Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett & Diamandi, 2014, p. 77). This co-operative endeavour between the higher education provider, the student, agencies and field educators assists to integrate theory and practice (AASW, 2012, p. 9). Theories such as the personalisation approach – person-centredness – are common within the Australian human services sector and are popularly applied by field education students, field educators and professionals in the workplace. From our conversations, five themes emerged.

THEMES

We embraced the opportunity for an intense dialogic exchange about field education and respectfully listened to each other. We captured a spectrum of thinking about personhood and placement, focusing on multiculturalism and refugees, disability, Aboriginal issues and justice.

Theme I. Defining humanity and personhood: Connection versus disconnection

Where are humanity and personhood found? How are humanity and personhood connected? These are complex questions challenging researchers, professionals, field educators and students. We agreed that how personhood and humanity (the collective noun for human beings) are defined, constructed and located has significant consequences within field education. We engaged with a range of thinking and extant literature about this topic and noted a lack of agreement on whether *human beings*, *humanity* or *people* are always *persons* (i.e., entities with a special moral status). As this can lead to confusion in discussions, we hereafter use the general terms, human beings, humanity and people,

when the moral status of these entities is left open, and the more specific terms, person and persons, when the special moral status of these entities is recognised. Emma bought clarity to this conversation through an example of a personal relationship:

Mum has advanced Parkinson's Disease. I think a person is a person by being genetically human.

Like Emma, theologian John Swinton (2012, p. 157) views humanity as a community within which membership is biological and genealogical. By being human, we are all persons (Swinton, 2012, p. 157). In this perspective, humanity and personhood are tightly connected.

In contrast, theorists such as the philosopher Peter Singer disconnect personhood from humanity. Singer defines a human being as "a member of the species *homo sapiens*", but disconnects *person* from *human* (Singer, 2011, p. 74). He states, "I propose to use person in the sense of a rational and self-aware being" (Singer, 2011, pp. 74-75), reasoning that there are members of the human species who are not persons in this sense (Singer, 2011, p. 74). Using this reasoning, Singer (2011, p. 75) argues that it may be acceptable to kill members of the species *homo sapiens* who are considered not rational and self-aware. This argument abandons doctrines on the sanctity of life, confronting religious and associated concepts about humanity and personhood (Singer, 2011, p. 155).

We did not abandon the idea of the sanctity of life in our inquiry but grounded our approach to the research question in our professional observations and experiences, such as teaching, as indicated by Emma's comment:

Theories of human nature are central to both ethics and political philosophy … So the idea of a "person" as an entity with special moral status is always there.

In our daily activities, like Emma, we listened to the messages in our work environments, particularly within field education, about where personhood is found. Three perspectives stood out. First, if humanity and personhood are separated, and humans are considered a means to some other end, then (at least some) humans can be depersonalised, ignored and/or disposed of, for example, the labelling of asylum seekers detained on Manus Island (Burnside, 2015). We have termed this the *disconnection* approach to humanity.

Second, if humanity is considered an end in itself, and someone's essential personhood is to be respected regardless of their contingent features such as life stage or location, then all humans are persons with rights. This view is consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights … Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. (United Nations, 1948, Articles 1 & 2)

We have termed this the connection (secular human rights) approach to humanity.

Third, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, if all humanity is made in the image of God, then all persons have an essential spiritual dimension. Aged care chaplain Naomi Fell, for example, role models through faith the locating of humanity and personhood for people living with dementia (Fell, 2006). We have termed this the *connection (essential spirituality)* approach to humanity.

Our discussion about field education later treats the connection approaches (secular human rights and essential spirituality) to humanity together, as they share a recognition of the personhood of *all* human beings. There is also a growing holistic understanding of spirituality as being integral to each person, regardless of faith:

[Spirituality] lies at the core of each person's being, an essential dimension which brings meaning to life … spirituality is not constituted only by religious practices, but must be understood more broadly, as relationship with God, however God or ultimate meaning is perceived by the person, and in relationship with other people. (MacKinlay, 2001, p. 52)

These three approaches to humanity can influence how a field education student engages with each person receiving a service from an organisation. The approaches can affect empathy, as well as the type and quality of any contracted plans or referrals the student makes, as highlighted in this example:

Monica: *Many students on placement assess people's situations … organisational perceptions about personhood can influence the way a student explains the assessment process to the person.*

Theme II. The importance of love for upholding personhood
We inquirers often talked about love:

Helen: *What makes us people? It has something to do with love, compassion…*

Helen: *It is an essential Christian ideology, love as we have been loved by God… unconditionally…*

Emma: *It is possible to love every person, no matter what age, stage, functional ability etc.*

Karen: *There is always a quality of love.*

Similar to the above conversations, Swinton (2012, p. 280) argued that love is at the heart of human relationality, while Kierkegaard (1987, p. 216) questioned what a human being is without love. Many kinds of love exist, from the love for a parent to the love of God (Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 216). It appeared to us that demonstrating love to people involved choice. For example, Helen pointed to Jesus teaching people to love their neighbours as they loved themselves (Matthew 22:39 *New International Version*). We noted that when someone upheld another's personhood and chose to share love with them, the other person became valued:

Janice: *Every little positive effort everyone makes to understand others, especially people who feel dehumanised is worthwhile. In prison … a Christian program made the women attending all [personalised] placemats. A young woman looked at [her placemat with her] name and*

its meaning, all nicely decorated. Tears flowed. She said, "Often I have not been called by my name." She listed the expletives others often have called her.

A similar example is found in Princess Diana's description of her engagement with people in hospital: "I … spend hours at a time with patients holding their hands and talking to them. Some of them will live and some will die, but they all need to be loved while they are here" (The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, 2017).

Similarly, in Nelson Mandela's statement about his love for white people after he was released from imprisonment: "I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies" (Mandela, 2013, p. 568). On the struggle to end apartheid: "no-one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they learn to hate, they can be taught to love" – the importance of love to personhood is evident (Mandela, 2013, pp. 621–622). For us, and for people like Princess Diana and Nelson Mandela, *every person* is to receive love and to know dignity.

We inquirers also discussed examples of when love was not shared and personhood was diminished. Examples of horrific treatment were discussed, such as the Holocaust and the forced and violent removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands.[2] Stories in which personhood was diminished affected us all:

Emma: *Asylum seekers have been demonised by politicians who do not want to share … Personhood provides a limit on what we do to each other … It keeps us behaving in a civilised fashion to each other. Political kowtowing. Disgusting. There's no philosophical justification for it.*

We also noted that even in the most horrific places, love survived. This is well illustrated by this poem found in Auschwitz:

I believe in the sun
Even when it is not shining.
I believe in love
Even when I cannot feel it.
I believe in God
Even when He is silent.
(Anon, n.d.)

The importance of love also arose during our discussions about reconciliation and peace work. This included conversations about the importance of peace, empathy, compassion, apology and forgiveness, such as the government's apology to Australian Indigenous peoples. Karen, who applies NVC techniques when supervising students on placements, noted that NVC teaches skills for *doing* love through compassion and connection, based on its recognition of the beauty that can be found in every human being.

Even though we each had different insights about love, regardless of our discipline we found that our practice and teaching could be person-centred. We also felt that students on placement can facilitate opportunities for all humans to know inclusion, belonging and love – for example, through their referrals.

Theme III. A person-centred approach transforms and challenges practice and field education

This inquiry noted the importance of students' empathy, attitudes and values in relation to undertaking person-centred practice when on placement:

Karen: *The aim is to evoke an empathic, natural connection in the hope that all needs may be met.*

A person-centred approach challenges practice and gives choice and control to people (Beresford et al., 2011, p. 355). People's being is given solemnity by having the power of choice (Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 176). We noted, through our inquiry that in the human services sector, person-centred approaches give dignity to people by valuing the relationship between the service user and the worker. The approaches ensure that the person (i.e., the service user) is central to any action, is listened to by workers and has power in the relationship. This approach transforms professionals' and students' language, attitudes and interventions by reinforcing respect, listening, flexibility, positivity, currency and treating people as individuals (Beresford et al., 2011, p. 355). For us, a person that a student is assisting whilst on placement is not the means *to something*. Rather, we argue that every person has an identity, is an end in themselves and has a context:

Monica: *I have a friend who I have known for 33 years, who lives in a nursing home. Most of my life he prayed for me, he and his wife always remembered my birthday, Christmas etc. He now lives with dementia and a number of other disabilities and does not remember my name anymore. He is still an important person – this has not changed. Now I remember him.*

The person, like Monica's friend, and a holistic understanding of their situation in their social context and environment including their natural environment (Boetto, 2016), are primary in any person-centred conversation, eco-social model, welfare intervention or field education assessment task. In challenging the disconnection approach to personhood, there must be no metric in field education valuing the complexity of a person's understanding. A person is significant even if their understanding of their situation is unobservable or unacceptable to those around them. The following conversation highlights this:

Eric: *Phenomenological necessary but not sufficient [when defining personhood]…*

Emma: *If you do not have the capacity [to make moral decisions] it does not mean you are not a person. Rather you provide opportunities for others to provide those qualities.*

We posit that the theoretical underpinning of any student's field activity should include an approach to personhood that can be used to ground arguments, create opportunities and inform practice. Connection approaches ensure that the person is the centre of care and that field education structures respond accordingly. Conversely, disconnected structures and practices can negatively influence students' and professionals' approaches to personhood.

Regarding field education, justice-focused welfare organisations provide many student placements. Eric provided an example from *The New Yorker* magazine of what happens when structures are not accountable and cause professionals to lose sight of the person.

In this article, Press (2016) told of the horrendous treatment of mentally ill prisoners in a south Florida prison, who repeatedly informed workers that they were being tortured, abused and starved. Some prison workers assumed that the inmates were lying or were mentally incompetent, while others, fearing victimisation for whistleblowing, suppressed information (Press, 2016).

Theme IV. A person is and is always becoming a person

Is personhood static, dynamic or both? Does personhood change according to the circumstances? These are the themes of the poem that Janice shared with us, titled: "Who Am I?" written while the author was in a Nazi prison (Bonhoeffer, 2016).

Who am I?…
Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself? …

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? …
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

(Bonhoeffer, 2016, para. 1, 5, 6, 7 & 8)

We concluded that someone *is* both always a person and always *becoming* a person, because the capacity for change is fundamental to human life. Socially constructed judgements about personal characteristics can result in people being unable to register the beauty that can be found in every person. To demonstrate this, Karen shared:

My father could not speak for the last five years – but I still experienced a full connection with him despite the lack of words.

Janice and Emma, alongside Karen, challenged us and social work students to not limit views of personhood to one feature:

Emma: *There are a bundle of things making up the human condition. There are people who cannot do things. We want to keep those people as persons.*

Janice: *I have been supporting students on placement and helping them reflect on loss and grief issues and the challenges that brings to someone's sense of who they are and their identity. I think it is helpful to remind students that part of their role includes enabling others to connect to the essence of who people are regardless of their circumstances.*

Janice further extended this theme by arguing against isolating people's personhood to one or a few stages of life. We considered that all people have purpose and are interconnected within society. Personhood is expressed within community, either as a positive or negative connection:

Janice: *Mutuality and interconnectedness exists between people … a sense of purpose to learn and receive from each other.*

Helen agreed, adding that:

Each person is a being whose purpose exists even before birth and is expressed throughout the person's past, present and future.

Theme V. The connection approach to personhood within field education
In this inquiry, we circled through a plethora of ideas and literature from our disciplines, which we then integrated to inform field education. We considered the following aspects and summary of our exploration of the literature and conversations most important to field education.

First, that the person is central to practice and field education, and that our disciplines informing person-centred approaches are interrelated. Literature, theories and conversations about person-centred approaches are enriched through multidisciplinary insight and challenging of assumptions.

Second, that placement experience is mediated through relationships. Whether the placement is direct or indirect, the extent to which the student will achieve outcomes that closely reflect the person's aspirations depends on the degree to which they can listen to, hear and articulate the person's needs within a person-centred framework co-created by the student, supervisor, academics and person.

Third, the group felt that the acceptance of the dynamic nature of personhood, including the existence of imperfection and the potential to do harm, supports a restorative frame-work for social work practice and field education. This includes remorse, confession, forgiveness and self-forgiveness:

Helen: *Ability to have regret. Desire to do a better job next time. To improve, to acknowledge how you fail and the need to repair that.*

Fourth, professionals, field educators and students need to be familiar with contemporary theoretical and other conversations about personhood. We need to recognise the complexity of discourses and constructs about personhood and to be at least aware of new perspectives, while never forgetting the human experience and history with which we engage daily:

Monica: *Theoretical underpinning influences social work action and field education. How we teach students, make assessments and interpret social situations can change over time… [Two examples are] First, the impact of past teaching of social work students about deviance theory versus the current teaching of a strengths approach. Second, I have met social workers who regret their role in removing Indigenous children from their families [the] … "stolen generations"… I am striving through field education to teach current social work students practical skills that will allow them to deal with complex ethical issues involving personhood.*

LIMITATIONS

This inquiry represents a discursive moment in time (Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 173). It is not a survey, is not quantitative and is limited to contributions from a grouping of like-minded colleagues. Therefore, the themes generated may not be representative of the full spectrum of current thinking about personhood and its relationship to field education (Jones-Mutton et al., 2015, p. 93).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of our inquiry, we make the following three recommendations:

1. Student orientations to field education require students to access cross-disciplinary resources about personhood, particularly on the connected views of personhood.

2. Students undertake activities that encourage them to listen to the voices of people receiving assistance, observe their lived realities and then explore these experiences in supervision and assessment tasks.

3. Conversations and literature about personalisation approaches explicitly define personhood and seek to develop relevant skills, such as those embedded in the Non-violent Communication model.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed to deepen the understanding of personhood within a field education context. The individual student on placement or a worker can be relatively disempowered in comparison to large structures, systems, policies and politics, which may seek to erase the person in favour of other ends. Therefore, it is crucial that field education students, field educators and professionals can recognise the underlying approaches to humanity and personhood, to allow students to critically reflect on how best to practice in a person-centred way and highlight situations that might undermine this. A clear sense of personhood and its importance on the part of students and professionals also reduces their risk of accepting powerful discourses that have damaging consequences for all humanity, and particularly for vulnerable populations. For these reasons, the development of a deep understanding of personhood is essential for professionals across the human services, academics teaching field education and students on placement.

Notes

1. In this project, "authentic" means students and others having a "genuine" experience including of the workplace, connections with people and practice dilemmas (Maidment, 2006, p. 47).

2. In the first half of the 1900s in Australia, with only a few notable exceptions (e.g., the missionary couple, the Schenks, who saw Indigenous people as fellow brothers and sisters), the implementation of the White Australia Policy included the horrific "die out policy" for "full blood" Aboriginal people and "breed out policy" for "half castes" (Moran, 1986, pp. 102, 213–214).

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