A relational understanding of strengths-based practice in social work

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Abstract

Although principles underlying the concept of strengths-based are not new, approaches to social work grounded in this ethos have emerged as a priority in practice and policy in recent years. There are, though, relatively poor theoretical and empirical evidence bases to guide implementation, the lack of evidence in part due to the theoretical deficit. In this article, we articulate a more robust theoretical basis to strengths-based practice (SBP) from a relational social science perspective. The emergent nature of agents and structures through their relationality is examined. We discuss this understanding regarding (1) identity and authenticity; (2) agency, power, and empowerment, and (3) relational goods to elaborate this relational understanding of strengths-based social work. In doing this, we set more robust theoretical underpinnings for future development and evaluation of SBPs.

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Introduction

A strengths perspective to social work is not a new phenomenon (e.g. Saleebey 1996, 1997); however, recent years have seen an international growth in policy, practice, and research interests in strength-based approaches (e.g. Staudt, Howardw, and Drake 2001; Pulla et al. 2012; Friedli 2013; Department of Health & Social Care 2019; Caiels, Milne, and Beadle-Brown 2021; Caiels et al. 2024). National guidance for the Care Act in England, the main legislative framework for adult social care, for example, indicates that people's strengths and support are considered whilst their care needs are assessed. In that context, several strengths-based approaches have been promoted as suitable for practice, including Restorative Practice, Three Conversations, Making Safeguarding Personal, Asset-Based Community Development and Local Area Coordination [Department of Health (DH) 2017]. This is a diverse set of practices, some aimed more at working with individuals, others more at a community level (but all crossing these boundaries to some extent), and each approach with varying degrees of defined detail and evidence behind it. There is a sense of 'shared components of the different but complementary approaches' (DH 2017: 4), but this underpinning sense has not emerged empirically nor conceptually, hampering implementation.

The premise of strengths-based practice (SBP) offers many potential rewards to different audiences, which is part of its appeal, sometimes supported by the broad and generally blurred nature of the concept. Often it seems some of the appeal of SBP rests on what it is said to be in opposition to, specifically a mechanistic or overly bureaucratic approach to practice, removed from a concern with the person and focusing disproportionately on people's deficits/needs. This critique of some aspects of current practice links to a concern that too often non-SBPs contribute to making people excessively dependent, particularly on services.

This understanding of what SBP is in opposition to does not, though, move us much further forward in understanding what this mode of practice is and how it is an improvement, that is, what it looks like in practice. This does not help to effectively implement SBP and understand what needs to be different compared to overly bureaucratic practice, except presumably less of some undefined elements of bureaucracy. Despite this lack of theoretical and empirical clarity (Staudt, Howardw, and Drake 2001; Tew et al. 2019; Price et al. 2020; Caiels, Milne, and Beadle-Brown 2021; Moore 2022), and critique of implementation of SBP (e.g. Slasberg & Beresford 2017; Daly & Westwood 2018), support for such approaches does not seem to be waning.

More has been done to develop a detailed understanding of some approaches to SBP and their implementation, for example, Three Conversations (Stevens et al. 2024), but urgently needed is a stronger conceptual foundation across strengths-based approaches to social work.

In turn, this would support developing a more robust empirical basis to SBP and its impacts. From such a clearer position, we could better articulate what high-quality SBP looks like and how to implement it.

Without a stronger theoretical understanding, SBP risks being pulled in many directions, including supporting ideological positions, such hyper-individualized senses of people needing support, that many would not want to see in practice (Gray 2011). Our understanding needs to embrace a perspective conceiving of SBP as a complex intervention in complex contexts, with manifold interactions (Skivington et al. 2021). In this article, we contribute to developing this theoretical understanding of SBP as a complex phenomenon from a relational social science perspective, which we define later.

Social work and SBP

Whilst there is no one definition of, nor approach to SBP in social work, there are core principles concerning what this practice encompasses and how it resonates with social work. These principles include starting from understanding people, what they want for a good life and what they already have to help them achieve this, working through relationships grounded on mutuality, collaboration, respect and trust, engaging wider social networks where possible, and promoting social justice [Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2015; Mahesh, Bharatan, and Miller 2024; Miller, 2025]. This has been described as a revolution from current practice and systems which support/hinder this form of practice (Miller 2025), and as emphasizing people over bureaucratic procedures (Lyn Romeo, the then Chief Social Worker for Adults in England, quoted in DH 2017). The resonance of core SBP principles with professional values but a failure of organizational systems to support operationalizing this practice is a relevant contemporary theme (Mahesh, Bharatan, and Miller 2024).

One of the challenges with implementing SBP is that the current understanding of it seems to be grounded in drawing together a loose collection of other concepts, sometimes themselves also fairly loosely defined, deployed to articulate what practice should look like, without necessarily developing a coherent theoretical understanding or practice model. One example is:

> Choice, control, citizenship and connectedness are common themes underpinning all strengths-based work. A strengths-based mind set draws extensively on personalisation and co-production, working in partnership to develop co-designed solutions which prevent harm and abuse, reduce obstacles and discrimination, and restore and support family relationships. A strengths-based approach starts with a different conversation. (DH 2017: 7)

Here we see an array of concepts relating to individuals in which some seem to relate to a process (e.g. personalization and co-production), others to potentially desired outcomes (e.g. citizenship, connectedness, and family relationships), and others potentially float across these (e.g. choice and control). Several of these concepts are highly debated as to their meaning in the literature, such as co-production being described as potentially reduced to a buzzword (Locock and Boaz 2019; Bandola-Gill, Arthur, and Leng 2023). There is no clear consideration of who the agents are in this process nor of what it is to be an agent. Perhaps we need to start from a more fundamental look at what social work is.

Social work can be conceived of as concerned with 'achieving negotiated change in the lives of people who face difficulties' (Ann Davies, in Folgheraiter 2007: 7). The approach employed to social work will, then, shape this negotiation and, consequently, the nature of the change. In this understanding, we see social work as a process of joint action between actors, rather than an action by a social worker (Folgheraiter 2007), which accords with how social workers report seeing SBP, namely as complex and dynamic (Caiels et al. 2024).

To understand practice, we, therefore, need to further unpack the nature of that negotiation, for example, what and who are the actors involved in this joint action, what are the interactions between them, what effects do these interactions have, and how does this best allow for a helpful negotiated outcome? A core critique from a strengths perspective is that non-strengths-based approaches, particularly if driven by overly bureaucratic concerns, lack humanity in this negotiation. Actors are dehumanized as isolated issues, and processes beyond the primary concerns of the actors take precedence, for example, people become secondary to administrative requirements. People are then reduced to a 'case' with problems detached from a rounded understanding of their lives (Saleebey 1997). Further, a critique goes, in this non-strengths-based process, there is no consideration of what promotes health and wellbeing (or salutogensis) (Antonovsky 1979; Friedli 2013). The process of social work negotiation then becomes limited and distorted by a narrow interpretation of people's lives and what is possible.

Any understanding of SBP, then, ought to say something about the actors involved (social workers, people they are working to support, and family members and others in the social network), particularly understanding them as rounded humans, and the place of mutual respect between them as a basis for the negotiation about meaning and future actions. It also needs to incorporate an understanding of the environment of the negotiation and how this can shape the possibilities open to actors. However, such an underpinning theoretical understanding of the actors involved, contexts, processes of interaction, and their relation to outcomes is rarely currently explicitly articulated in SBP approaches. This suggests that there is no clear conceptual understanding of such

fundamental issues across SBPs. These tensions and oscillations mirror concerns in social science—between theoretical positions chiefly stressing either individual agents or social structures, into which space was brought a relational perspective bringing the two together. This is the theoretical development we will now discuss.

A relational understanding

We will articulate in this article a more robust theoretical underpinning to SBP from a relational perspective, or having taken the 'relational turn' in the social sciences (e.g. Emirbayer 1997; Dépelteau 2008; Donati 2010, 2018). Whilst social work is sometimes described as relational, this is usually meant to convey the sense of practice as being about interpersonal relationships (agents), particularly as a counter to overemphasizing administrative processes (structures). Here we set out a fuller understanding of a relational social science perspective, which goes beyond a focus solely on interpersonal relations, and the implications this has for understanding social work and SBP.

This 'relational turn' has been in part articulated in social science in response to debates concerning whether we should give primacy to structure or agency in understanding society. In a relational perspective, it is not either structure or agency determining events; it is both/and. A relational perspective requires us to not undertake analysis by assuming defined individuals and structures as starting points for examining social phenomena. Rather, the focus should commence from the relations and interactions between agents and with structures, that is, the web of relations of social phenomena we are embedded in. Agents *and* structures can, then, be conceived as interactants (Burkitt 2016), mutually entangled and influencing, and with emergent properties from the interactions.

The phenomena, including individual actors, that we usually take for granted as static and pre-given when considering a social situation are, seen from this perspective, more fluid and constantly (re)emerging in ongoing relational processes. Society here is not one overarching, determining structure but manifold, ongoing relations, including agents, and with interdependencies and interactions which shape what agents are in that context (Burkitt 2018). Or, as Donati (2018: 433) summarizes this understanding, 'society is relations'. Relations are the conceptual and analytical starting point, not the individuals nor the structures, moving debate away from omitting any aspect or emphasizing one as primary.

The situations, interactants, and processes we consider in any analysis we define for the purpose of that understanding, but it is important to remember from a relational perspective that they are an abstraction from this whole, ongoing relational society. Analytically, we must in our sensemaking separate phenomena out from this continuous web of

relations and processes of emergence, and to be able to discuss specific actors, structures, and processes, rather than conflate them all. However, ultimately, we need to understand that they are intertwined into these larger connections and unfolding, dynamic interactions of society, which continually (re)shape interactants (Elias 1978; Archer, 2010a,b, 2012; Donati and Archer 2015; Selg 2018).

This is an ongoing process of emergence in which 'every social phenomenon arises from a relational context and generates another relational context' (Donati 2018: 433). These social processes are not necessarily linear with pre-definable, generalizable outcomes. Interactants are likely to be somewhat different because of their interactions in phase 1, and hence a different process of emergence may be enacted in the new context, or phase 2, and so on. This is a continuous process of actors and structures acting on and changing each other (double morphogenesis) (Archer 2010a), remoulding the relational web and each other, but in turn also potentially being reshaped themselves. The nature of this unfolding can be steady, such that we perceive stability in the short to medium term of actors and structures, but at other times more dramatic with clearly distinct changes. This is not to say, though, that the processes of emergence are limitless, as not all changes are possible. There will be parameters and tendencies to this morphogenesis, but these may also contain some surprises for actors.

Understanding these relational webs, whether in social work practice or research, requires us to actively focus on the relations ahead of the actors, or activate 'a reflexivity on the relations' (Donati 2018: 435). In doing this, we aim to mindfully step '"inside" the social relation' (Donati 2018: 435), seeking to understand its interactants and dynamism. In social work, it means stepping into the relation of the negotiating process that is practice understanding how interactants are emerging in that process and the implications for the next phase of interaction.

A relational understanding of SBP

Without a more coherent theoretical underpinning, discussion of SBP tends towards a narrow interpersonal relations perspective on practice, rather than the relational (actors and structures as interactants with emergent properties) understanding we have developed above. SCIE (2015), for example, defines SBP as happening between individuals, and although in this understanding there is a concern with the quality and nature of the relationship between them, the individuals are accepted as coming first, fully formed prior to the interactions. There is no explicit understanding of them as interactants in part being formed in the interaction, and no view of the potential of morphogenesis each might undertake because of the interaction. There is an understanding of essential,

given, and static qualities in people (strengths, needs, etc.), and that interpersonal relationships in the social worker negotiation are a vehicle to surface them. This is the reason for one of the critiques of SBP, that is, that in this focus on actors as fully formed and independent, it tends to overlook the conditions/structures within which people are actors, for example, the social determinants of wellbeing (Gray 2011; Friedli 2013).

A relational understanding goes beyond this interpersonal perspective, seeing SBP, social work, indeed all social phenomena, in terms of interactants themselves emergent from the webs of relationships. In understanding this relational social work, we need to mindfully practice consideration of the relational web of a context and its emergent patterns for interactants, rather than commencing from thinking of pre-given individuals with absolute needs and strengths, pre-defined and embodied in them, static and ready to be surfaced in the discussion/negotiation. Actors and their strengths/needs (and understanding of these) are to varying degrees emergent from interactions in the relational webs.

From this relational perspective, we understand part of the potential in SBP, namely, to take a wider perspective on the relational web (i.e. to include aspects of people's lives not necessarily considered in an overly bureaucratic, prescriptive approach to social work) and from there to seek to lay a better path for processes of emergence from that web to a better future. The goal should be to (re)form a more suitable relational web for the next phase of interactions and the person's life, recognizing that the situation will remain emergent. Sometimes a more stable situation over time may emerge, but other times the new relational web may be temporary, requiring further attention soon.

As strengths and needs are emergent in interactions, a different set of interactions/interactants can surface another set of, or perspective on strengths and needs as, for example, the social worker or someone else helps the person being supported to understand and articulate different possibilities for future interactions. There may be alternative narratives emerging amongst interactants, and SBP provides an opportunity to explore a wider sense of these and implications for a person's sense of identity and their life than would be possible in an overly bureaucratic mode of developing a negotiated understanding.

In addition, a relational lens on this process draws out that strengths and needs are continually emergent as relations amongst interactants continue to unfold. A strength identified with a person may only be activated in some relational configurations. By stepping into the relations around a negotiation, we can be reflexive as to whether we are presuming things to be stable and the only possibility, or whether other paths of emergence and understanding are possible, and how. This is about being flexible towards understanding strengths/needs/solutions as things evolve in the longer term, but also adopting a more open approach to understanding the issues in the initial interactions.

In the remainder of this article, we focus on key themes in social work and ones central to SBP, and what a relational understanding of them entails. These are the issues of (i) identity and authenticity, and (ii) agency, power and empowerment. To elaborate our understanding of relational processes further, we then discuss a third theme, (iii) relational goods. The latter is taken from a strand of relational theory, and it helps to elaborate our understanding of social work and SBP. The themes are discussed as analytically separate phenomena, but, as per our relational stance, they are always entwined in ongoing relational processes in contexts.

(i) Identity and authenticity

A relational perspective encourages us to be attentive to the fact that rather than assuming a very fixed identity ahead of an interaction and given characteristics of each person, such as a set of strengths and needs, we must consider how and the degree to which these emerge from interactions. Further, we need to understand their emergence as related to not only the interactions but also their relationship to each person's dominant style of reflexivity in that context (Archer 2012), that is, how they think of themselves and their place in the world. Identity, self, and as perceived by others, is, then, another element in a relational web, enmeshed in the ongoing processes of emergence and morphogenesis (Archer 2010a). The negotiation of social work interactions is a process of dialogue exploring with the person their sense of identity, and what needs/strengths emerge as we acknowledge.

The processes of dialogue and reflexivity in forming identity have been particularly explored in the Open Dialogue approach developed in mental health care, and which may be thought of as under the broad umbrella of SBP. Whilst Open Dialogue might not have been initially promoted as a mainstream social care SBP, not being included in, for example, SCIE (2015) and DH (2017), it is strengths based, drawing on the wider social network of people, and it highlights very clearly this process of dialogue and links to emergent identity and support. Proponents of Open Dialogue assert:

> How we talk has an effect on both the inner dialogues of the client and the dialogues that follow between her/him and those close to her/him. (Seikkula and Arnkil 2018: 1)

This idea of an ongoing exploratory dialogue as fundamental to SBP is implicit in the description of this mode of practice from the roundtable event discussed above from the report by the Department of Health (2017) in encompassing co-production between different groups of people. It is made more explicit in the Three Conversations approach (Stevens et al. 2024) which not only foregrounds 'conversation' in the

title, but encourages an ongoing dialogue between practitioners and citizens responding to unfolding situations and understandings. The Open Dialogue approach, though, even more clearly foregrounds dialogue and its relationship to identity and strengths.

Seen relationally, we get a deeper sense of this understanding to dialogue, recognizing that identity is not fixed but is emergent in ongoing webs of relations, including emerging to a degree from social worker-client interactions. Recognizing this has the potential to open new horizons for individuals and explicitly consider their relational webs and emerging identities, with SBP bringing considerations around strengths to this process. The negative potential also needs to be understood, though; namely, that dysfunctions can be created through the dialogue and across a relational web. Similarly, we need to recognize that dialogue alone may not be sufficient to help someone without also considering the structural aspects of a relational web and their impacts.

This relational understanding of identity brings a different perspective to authenticity, which has been seen as a desirable goal of SBP, that is, surfacing the authentic person (Moore 2022). Rather than a fixed phenomenon held by a person—that is they are or are not being authentic to a rigid set of characteristics—we need to understand being authentic as emergent in a context across a particular relational web. The more we theorize the idea of a core inner person to whom to be authentic, the more elusive and problematic the concept becomes (Taylor 1992; Guignon 2004). Authenticity occurs in social processes and is not innate and isolated within a person. Hence, if SBP is to realize authenticity, it should not be expecting to see it as a pre-defined nature in an actor. Rather, its locus should be understood as 'not my mind and yours, but rather the "between"' (Guignon 2004: 165). A sense of authenticity sits between actors and is understood situationally against the backdrop of what they individually and jointly believe and value. Such a process understanding of authenticity takes to heart the interconnectedness of life, not the one-sided expression of someone's will.

(ii) Agency, power, and empowerment

An actor and their agency are central concepts to SBP (Gray 2011; Daly and Westwood 2018). However, as noted above, there is a critique of a narrow conception of SBP that it overly emphasizes individuals and ignores their living conditions, notably social determinants and how these shape health and wellbeing and related inequalities (Marmot et al. 2012). This context will have an individual's agency, and many using support from social care face daily struggles to cope and may not have the resources to enact agency (Gray 2011). Such a narrow understanding of SBP and agency is more likely if we conceive a person's powers to be an

innate and relatively stable quality of them, rather than something inter-actional (relational).

Understanding agency from a relational perspective should remove the pitfall of over-emphasizing individuals as it makes explicit their circumstances as interactants in a relational web. Thinking relationally, we do not assume that actors simply have agency as an innate resource ready to be enacted. People can, to varying degrees, draw on their reflexivity concerning their circumstances to consider possible and preferred courses of action, but within constraints (Archer 2010a; Donati 2018). Hence:

> the opportunity to practise degrees of agency depends not only on our own personal capacities, such as for reflexivity, but from the situation itself and the style of our interdependencies. (Burkitt 2018: 536)

Agency is itself part of relational entanglement, entwined with identity, and emergent from interactions in ongoing, mutual creation across a relational web. Agency is, then, a process within a specific, dynamic context, rather than a possession carried across situations.

Related to agency, power, and empowerment are other core ideas to SBP (Pulla 2012) and, as such, they also need to be fully theoretically developed. Concerns with power and empowerment are longstanding in social work (e.g. Tew 2006; Adams 2017). Conceptions of power can overly stress a capacity for people to enact 'their power' and be self-reliant (Tew 2006; Rivest and Moreau 2015). At the other extreme, overly emphasizing a structurally determining definition of power may ignore individual capacities.

From a relational understanding, we conceive of power not as a phenomenon possessed by a person nor as one only sitting within structures being imposed on people, but as integral to and emergent from complex situations, entangled in the web of relations (Elias 1978; Foucault 1978, 1979; Burkitt 2018; Selg 2018). Social workers, then, need to understand the relational web they are working within, considering not only interpersonal relations and their effects on power/empowerment, but also the interactions of structures as interactants in the situation and how these can impose on and/or enable people's agency. Power is neither a possession of any one element in the relational web, nor usually a simple linear process. Rather, we need to conceive of power as:

> always embedded in localized milieus and networks, along with its ambiguous and sometimes contradictory character. (Burkitt 2018: 528)

In the processes of emergence through these local entanglements, power can have creative and enabling forms as well as oppressive operations (Tew 2006; Gilbert and Powell 2010; Rivest and Moreau 2015), and it can be constantly shifting across a relational web and over time. Power and dis/empowerment are ongoing processes, not either/or, on/off

phenomena. This understanding of power and related concepts helps us to understand their unfolding in Open Dialogue and Family Group Conferencing (Frost, Abram, and Burgess 2014), for example, but also to see that they are fundamental to social life beyond the specific confines of these practices.

As an 'emancipatory project' (Archer 2010b: 206), a relational perspective explicitly draws us to examine these issues of power across relational webs and to value reciprocity amongst interactants as a central pillar of civil society. A positive relational web includes participants valuing what they have collectively generated through their combined application of power and sharing a concern to continue to nurture this new relational arrangement (Archer 2013). This resonates with social work theory and practice. SBP can mean helping people move from seeing themselves as passive to more active agents in some contexts, but our understanding of which is the best SBP to achieve this in specific contexts is not empirically grounded at present.

(iii) Relational goods

To further a theoretical understanding of SBP, it is helpful to articulate the place of relational goods in the dynamism of unfolding relational webs. Relational goods (Donati 2010; Archer 2010b) are those positive phenomena (goods) emerging from interactions and which are never the possession of one actor in the relation. They sit across the relational web, positively energizing the next phases of interaction. Examples include trust, hope, friendship, and mutual respect. A positive phase of interaction can nourish these relational goods, taking them forward into the next phase of interaction. Relational goods cannot be reduced to any of the individuals in an interaction, and they have their own emergent properties, continuing to have effects on the relations and individuals, such as de/motivating people towards a course of action or sense of purpose (Donati and Archer 2015). It is important to note that people can orientate their actions towards nurturing relational goods, but, particularly across a wider relational web, this might not be entirely in an agent's control.

Strengths-based practice has been noted as connected with hope (e.g. Pulla 2012) and adopting a relational perspective, we can now conceive of this as a relational good to understand its place in interactions and emergence. As a relational good, hope and other relational goods, notably trust, can be nurtured in SBP between social workers and people they are supporting, positively fuelling the processes of emergence that generate identity and agency.

Sitting as they do across a web, relational goods may exist primarily between key actors, such as a social worker and a client, but they can be influenced by others in the web. For example, a social worker might have

a shared level of trust with someone, but another part of a care system might undermine/enhance this trust through a poor/positive interaction. A family member's intervention between the social worker and client can have similar effects on such relational goods as trust and hope.

Drawing on this understanding, we can see, for example, that a Three Conversations guided social work interaction is more likely to be effective where it is developing strong relational goods of trust and hope between the social worker and the person they are working to support. By bringing together a wider social network of people, Open Dialogue and Family Group Conferencing are seeking to work on the wider relational web and so need to understand enhancing relational goods like hope across that web rather than only in one person.

Recognizing such processes and emergent, shared goods, we must also acknowledge the possibilities of relational bads or evils, such as despondency and a lack of trust. These can also exist in a situation, sitting across the relational web of interactants. They can have a negative effect on agents and relations, adversely influencing the next phase of interactions and outcomes. Understanding the potential for relational evils helps us see how they could undermine the supportive social web that, for example, Open Dialogue is seeking to nurture.

From this perspective, we see how a simple dichotomy between more personal practice (as good) and bureaucratic practice (as bad) is not so straightforward. Practice that is more oriented to people's strengths can, if done well, work with relational goods, but structures (bureaucratic practices) may also be necessary to sustain those goods and enact positive outcomes. The relative merits of structures and approaches to work depend on whether they support or undermine the ongoing generation of relational goods and thereby facilitating moving to a better next phase of the relational web, not simply on the basis of the nature of the task.

Conclusions

Implementing new SBP in local authority adult social care requires complex changes involving interactions of systems, leadership, resources, and individuals (Ford 2019; Tew et al. 2019; Caiels et al. 2024). A conceptually underdeveloped understanding of SBP could undermine implementation and potentially support overly individualistic perspectives that fail to properly account for the structural determinants a person faces and the support they need. Moves have been made to develop a more connected conception of SBP linking agents and structures, such as for the Three Conversations approach (Stevens et al. 2024). However, more conceptual foundations are needed across SBP.

A relational understanding of social work and SBP provides a richer conceptualization that allows for individuals but also considers structures. It foregrounds the ongoing processes of interaction and the

resultant emergence of agents, their characteristics, and a series of goods between interactants. If organizations are to embrace SBP for social work, they need to create the right organizational environment support-ing social workers to be reflexive about the nature of their work and to engage in creative and flexible practice aiming to positively shift the re-lational web they and clients are immersed in. There will, of course, be limits to what can be done, but not fully conceptualizing the relational understanding can result in overly narrow practice which does not evolve as relational webs and goods continue to emerge from ongoing interac-tions. From a relational perspective, we can:

> point to a different possibility, the possibility of social relations that can better realize the humanity of social agents and give them the opportunity to achieve a good life. The good life (eudaimonia), in this vision, consists in participating in the creation and enjoyment of relational goods rather than relational evils. (Donati 2018: 452)

This resonates with the social work ethos. A relational analysis of SBP resonates with understanding practice as a negotiation or something co-created across systems and people's life worlds (Seikkula and Arnkil 2018). Implementation of SBP needs to understand this web and that in and through it for everyone becoming more human/e happens:

> to the extent that she generates social relationships that support the flourishing of relational goods from which she feeds herself in order to be more humane. (Donati 2018: 451)

A relational perspective does not give a definite model for SBP nor all the details of how most effectively to undertake this work, but it does give a more coherent and robust theoretical base from which to begin to develop this. This base accords with the 'fluid, flexible' (Caiels et al. 2024:177) understanding of social workers' report of SBP. The theoreti-cal grounding also helps us to begin to articulate more explicitly the requirements for evaluating practice. We recognize the need to examine the relational goods/evils being developed and the emerging web of rela-tions and emergent identities, goals, strengths, etc. in any support to a person. For some circumstances of practice, this might be a relatively simple process of practicing SBP, but in many instances of social work, it is a complex process with ongoing negotiation, interaction, decision mak-ing, and emergence. We need to conceive of SBP in social work as com-plex and ultimately relational.

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