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# Power in the Relationship Between Social Worker and Client, From a Social Worker's Perspective

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## Abstract

Power differentials are inherent in the relationship between social workers and clients. It is important for social workers to be aware of their power and consider how these power imbalances can be managed for the benefit of their clients. The following report explores how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients and identifies strategies to manage power to create positive outcomes for clients. The aims of the research are to explore how power may have both positive and negative effects on the relationship between social workers and clients; and to identify strategies for managing power relationships, to create positive outcomes for clients. The first chapter provides background to the topic and states the research question. Following this is a literature review that presents literature relevant to the topic. The review is organised into two sections. The first section examines sources and evidence of power. The second section examines the literature concerning strategies for managing power relationships to create positive outcomes for clients. The research was conducted using qualitative approach underpinned by an interpretative paradigm. The four participants were recruited through purposive sampling, and data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. A key finding of the research was that the participants experienced negative effects from being required to use their power to achieve outcomes that were against their clients' wishes. Participants identified supervision as a strategy for managing power relationships and creating positive outcomes for clients. The report ends by recommending further research into power in the relationship between clients and social workers.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Research Question and Aims.....	3
Report Outline.....	4
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Introduction.....	5
Sources and Evidence of Power.....	6
Organisational and Political Power.....	6
Control of Resources.....	7
Decision Making, Goal Setting and Planning.....	8
Professionals as Experts.....	10
Strategies for Managing Power Relationships.....	11
Social Worker Skills and Qualities.....	11
Empowerment.....	12
Supervision.....	13
Conclusion.....	14
<b>Chapter Three: Methodology.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Introduction.....	16
Methodology and Research Design.....	16
Research Participants.....	17
Data Collection.....	18
Data Analysis.....	19
Ethics.....	20
Informed Consent.....	20
Confidentiality.....	20
Security and Storage of Data.....	21
Conflict of Interest.....	21
Risk of Harm.....	21
Beneficence.....	21
Integrity.....	21
Limitations.....	22
Conclusion.....	23
<b>Chapter Four: Findings.....</b>	<b>24</b>

Introduction.....	24
Participants .....	24
Sources of Power .....	25
Legislation, Systematic and Organisational Power .....	25
Positional Power .....	27
Knowledge and Expert Power .....	28
Evidence of Power .....	29
Control of Resources .....	29
Decision Making, Goal Setting and Planning .....	30
Being Directive .....	31
Client Power .....	33
Effects of Power .....	34
Effects on the Relationship .....	34
Effects on the Client .....	34
Effects on the Social Worker .....	35
Strategies for Managing Power to Create Positive Outcomes .....	36
Social Worker Skills and Qualities .....	36
Empowerment .....	36
Supervision .....	37
Conclusion .....	38
<b>Chapter Five: Discussion .....</b>	<b>39</b>
Introduction .....	39
Sources of Power .....	39
Legislation, Systemic and Organisational Power .....	39
Knowledge and Expert Power .....	41
Evidence of Power .....	42
Control of Resources .....	42
Decision Making, Goal Setting and Planning .....	43
Effects of Power.....	44
Effects on the Relationship .....	44
Effects on the Client .....	45
Effects on the Social Worker .....	46
Strategies for Managing Power to Create Positive Outcomes .....	46
Social Worker Skills and Qualities .....	47
Empowerment .....	47
Supervision .....	48
Conclusion .....	49

<b>Chapter Six: Conclusions</b> .....	<b>50</b>
Introduction.....	50
Conclusions .....	50
Recommendations .....	51
Conclusion .....	52
<b>References</b> .....	<b>53</b>
Appendix One: Low Risk Notification .....	58
Appendix Two: Letter to Agency Manager .....	59
Appendix Three: Information sheet .....	61
Appendix Four: Interview Schedule .....	63

## Chapter One: Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients and to identify strategies to manage power to create positive outcomes for clients. Initially, I chose this topic because I find the whole concept of power interesting. On further reflection, I realised that there is always going to be a power differential between social workers and clients, therefore it is necessary for social workers to be aware of this, if they are to create a positive experience for their clients. When I was completing my social work placements, I noted different ways that power was used. I was curious to learn how social workers perceive power in their relationships with their clients.

Defining power is difficult as there are many theories that seek to describe the nature of power (Smith, 2008). Michel Foucault's work is frequently drawn on by researchers and theorists (see for example Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano & Bubar, 2013; Grant & Cadell, 2009; Healy, 1998). Foucault (1994) believed that power is omnipresent and part of all relationships. To Foucault, power was neither positive nor negative; whether power is felt coercively or positively depends on how it is used. He perceived power as operating on multi-levels; a single person could experience power in several different ways at the same time. The possession of power by one party in a relationship does not mean that the other party is without power, as both parties can experience power simultaneously. Foucault (1994) believed that those who are assumed to be lacking power, hold it in their ability to resist being coerced by the more powerful. For this research, the definition of power is taken from Smith (2008): "It can be described as the capacity, held individually or collectively, to influence either groups or individuals (including oneself) in a given social context".

This is considered an appropriate definition, for the purpose of this research, as it recognises that power is created within relationships. The above definition also suggests that power is a capacity that can be held by all parties in a relationship.

Understanding the power dynamic in the social worker/client relationship involves considering how power can be used over clients and how it can be shared with them.

The goal of empowering clients through participatory practice is often thought to be the most appropriate way for social workers to work with clients (Grant & Cadell, 2009).

When social workers work from a strengths perspective, they seek to empower clients and enable them to share power (Grant & Cadell, 2009). Participative practice

recognises that clients are partners in the relationship, and possess self-determination and control over decisions that affect them. The notion of shared power stems from

feminist theory and is aligned with social work values and the strengths perspective (Tew, 2006). The values that underpin the strengths approach are consistent with

ethical social work practice and reflect the skills employed by effective social workers (Munford & Sanders, 2005). The promotion of empowerment and the notion of

collective responsibility are included in the global definition of social work

(International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). For social workers to work in ways

that empower clients, it is necessary for them to understand the impact that power can have on their relationships with clients.

When power is exerted over clients, power and control rest with the social worker. This

is not necessarily experienced by the client as being coercive, as a social worker's

power over a client can be used to create positive change for the client (Bundy-Fazioli

et al., 2013). French and Raven (1962) identified five types of power that they

considered to be present in practitioner/client relationships. Unlike Foucault (1994),

they believed power to be unidirectional; it is possessed by the practitioner and absent

in the client. According to French and Raven (1962), legitimate power is inherently part of the practitioner/client relationship. It reflects the authority a practitioner has as an organisation's representative. Referent power is concerned with the power a practitioner has to create change through the quality of their relationship with a client. Professionals who are considered to be experts, and to know what is best for clients, possess power over clients. This relates to Foucault's (1980) belief that knowledge creates power. Coercive power involves the threat of negative consequences if a client refuses to comply with the practitioner's directives, and reward power involves the bestowing of rewards for complying with directives (French & Raven, 1962).

An examination of the existing literature highlighted ways in which power is evident in the relationship between social worker and client. Most of the studies describe how power is exerted over clients by social workers. Power was exerted through the control of resources, the control of decision making processes and by the professional taking on the role of expert. The ways in which power differentials could be addressed to create positive outcomes for clients was discussed by Maiter, Palmer and Manji (2006). This is an important consideration as the goal of social work is to create positive change and an increase in the wellbeing of clients (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

## Research Question and Aims

The research question is: How does power affect the relationship between social workers and clients? The aims of the research are to explore how power may have both positive and negative effects on the relationship between social workers and clients;

and to identify strategies for managing power relationships, to create positive outcomes for clients.

## Report Outline

The report consists of six chapters. This chapter has introduced the topic, and the research question and aims. Chapter two is a review of literature relevant to the topic. Chapter three describes the methodology and research design. It includes a discussion of how participants were recruited, and how data were collected and analysed. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how ethics, relevant to the study, were considered, and identification of the limitations of the study. Chapter four presents the findings from the interview with the participants. Chapter five presents a discussion, which links the participant responses to previous relevant literature. Finally, chapter six draws conclusion based on client responses and previous literature.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients and to identify strategies to manage power to create positive outcomes for clients. The following literature review discusses relevant social work literature. The review is divided into two sections. The first section will examine sources and evidence of power. It particularly focuses on organisational and political power; control of resources; decision making; goal setting and planning and professionals as experts. The second section examines the literature concerning strategies for managing power relationships to create positive outcomes for clients. This section of the review includes consideration of social worker skills and qualities, empowerment, and supervision. It concludes with a discussion on how supervision may be used to help social workers to manage their power, so that they are able to retain their wellbeing and remain effective.

The majority of the resources used in this literature review were accessed online through the Massey University Library. Discover, Scopus and Google Scholar data bases were searched to identify journal articles and books that were likely to be relevant to the topic. The main search terms used were: social work power nz; power; managing power; supervision nz; and empowerment. These searches revealed a variety of relevant sources. Further potential sources were identified from the reference lists of relevant journal articles and books. The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics was accessed by typing ANZASW into Google.

## Sources and Evidence of Power

### **Organisational and Political Power**

Organisations have power over clients, as they control the provision of services and distribution of resources that they need (Hasenfeld, 1987). Social work practice is shaped by the organisation in which a social worker works and this has an impact on the relationship between social worker and client, which is inherently unequal due to the authority that a social worker holds as a representative of the organisation (Hasenfeld, 1987; Smith, 2008). This power dynamic can be difficult for social workers to manage, as they are often not trained to handle their power over their clients (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009).

Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson and Hardiman (2009) acknowledged that statutory child protection social workers possess power as representatives of the government and the legal system. This gives them the authority to use coercive power to obtain cooperation from caregivers. Nevertheless, they believe that social workers still have the opportunity to share power to create positive change. Their research, which was conducted in the United States of America, revealed that both social workers and clients felt powerless within the statutory child protection system (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009). Healy (1998) also noted the power evident in statutory child protection agencies. However, she believed that coercive power is not always negative. It can be positive, at times, because sometimes coercion is required to create change and keep children safe. She followed Foucault's (1994) assertion that power can be employed by more than one person simultaneously, and considers that both social workers and clients have power within the child protection system (Healy, 1998).

## **Control of Resources**

Hasenfeld (1987) viewed power in the relationship between social worker and client as dichotomous; the person who has control of resources valued by the other possesses the power in the relationship, while the other party lacks power. According to Hasenfeld (1987), power is not necessarily exclusively held by the social worker because even though they may control access to resources and services required by the client, the client may also possess resources needed for the agency to meet its service provision goals. However, due to the nature of power, the social worker and client cannot possess power simultaneously; if one person has power the other lacks power (Hasenfeld, 1987). Cohen's (1998) American study supported Hasenfeld's (1987) claim that power is possessed by those who have control of resources. She obtained the perspectives of both clients and workers, which led her to the conclusion that those who possessed power were the workers, as they had the ability to either withhold or bestow resources. This enabled them to exert control over the clients, who had to comply to the workers' imperatives and thereby lose autonomy, in order to secure resources (Cohen, 1998).

The power that social workers have through control of resources is not inherently negative. In fact, Foucault (1994) believed that power in itself is neither negative nor positive. Whether power is experienced as positive or negative depends on how it is used; in some cases, power may be felt as oppressive and in others as productive or protective (Tew, 2006). Some of the participants who took part in a Canadian study by Gladstone, Fitzgerald and Brown (2013) experienced power as being used negatively by social workers. They felt that if they accepted resources they would incur greater scrutiny from the child protection agency, as their ability to care for their grandchildren would be questioned. However, other participants commented on the positive effects of social workers controlling resources. They believed this gave them access to physical

resources and services that helped them to care for their grandchildren effectively (Gladstone, Fitzgerald & Brown, 2013). Social workers are able to use their position in an agency and their networking skills to provide resources to clients that they would not have had access to without input from the social worker (Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano & Bubar, 2013). In this way they endeavour to share their power.

When power is used as if it is a possession, it manifests as power over one party of a relationship by another (Smith, 2008). Power may then be seen as an entity that can be used over the more dominant party to exploit resources to control the behaviour of the subjugated party to the relationship (Smith, 2008). The view that power is not an entity, but is created through social interaction, opens up the possibility that power is infinite and can be possessed by all parties in a relationship simultaneously (Foucault, 1994). This has implications for the management of power in the relationship between social worker and client. If both parties have access to power simultaneously, a more equal relationship where resources can be shared for the benefit of all parties is possible, as social workers do not feel they have to surrender their power in order to empower clients.

### **Decision Making, Goal Setting and Planning**

The strengths perspective is thought to reflect social work values and effective practice and is frequently incorporated into the practice of social workers, working in a variety of fields of practice. (Munford & Sanders, 2005). Working from a strengths perspective has a positive impact on the client/social worker relationship (Jack, 2005), as major tenet of the strengths perspective is that clients are entitled to self-determination. They should be involved in any decisions that involve them and have the opportunity to

participate fully in decision making and planning regarding service delivery and outcomes (Grant & Cadell, 2009). These views are also reflected in the principles of the Code of Ethics, which underpins social work practice in New Zealand (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2007).

However, control can at times be exerted by social workers in the decision making, goal setting and planning processes with little consideration of the clients' wishes. This has the effect of disempowering clients and leaving them feeling that they have no control over service delivery, even though the aim of service provision is generally to increase client wellbeing (Cohen, 1998; Dumbrill, 2006). Gladstone, Fitzgerald and Brown's (2013) Canadian study identified social workers' tendency to be directive and take charge when interacting with clients. Interestingly, social workers who described acting in a directive manner did not perceive themselves as being coercive; they saw their actions as being in the clients' best interests, and therefore helpful to the clients. However, clients' perceptions differed from those of social workers. Some resented being told what they could and could not do and others were dissatisfied with the failure of social workers to provide explanations for their decisions (Gladstone, Fitzgerald & Brown, 2013). This highlights the subjectivity that is involved in negotiating relationships between social workers and clients. Each party to the relationship has a different perspective as to the nature of the relationship. They interpret the intentions of the other party based on their subjective understandings of the other's behaviour, which may or may not be accurate (Gladstone, Fitzgerald & Brown, 2013).

Social work values and ethics require social workers to work in a way that empowers clients and ensures that they are given the opportunity to develop their own goals and be involved in decisions that concern them (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of

Social Workers, 2007). Several researchers noted that this is often not the case. Workers may take control of the decision making and goal setting processes by excluding clients from intervention planning, presenting them with a completed plan at the initial meeting and failing to discuss clients' views and wishes with them (Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano & Bubar, 2013; Cohen, 1998; Dumbrill, 2006). Some clients become so used to experiencing worker control over their lives that they do not see this approach to goal setting as negative. Most clients who were interviewed by Cohen (1998), in her American study, said that they were happy for workers to take control of goal setting as, "they know what's best for us" (Cohen, 1998, p. 437). Strategies that give clients a voice in decision making and empower them to assert their right to make choices and control their environment, go some way towards lessening power differentials and creating positive outcomes for clients (Hasenfeld, 1987). Empowered clients are enabled to make their own choices about service delivery, which contributes to positive outcomes (Payne, 2014)

### **Professionals as Experts**

The strengths perspective challenges the perception of social workers as experts and guides social workers towards valuing the strengths and resources that clients possess, which can be harnessed to contribute to their wellbeing. According to the strengths perspective, clients are recognised as being experts regarding their own lives and circumstances (Saleeby, 2002). Social workers' training, experience and access to information combine to give them knowledge that clients may not have. This information and knowledge can be used positively to contribute to positive outcomes for clients (Lam & Kwong, 2014).

Foucault (1980) wrote of the relationship between power and knowledge. He believed that knowledge creates power. When social workers take on the role of expert they use their knowledge to gain power over their clients (Grant & Cadell, 2009). If their beliefs in their own standing as experts are coupled with the belief that clients' problems are the result of individual failings or pathology, practice becomes based on a deficit model. Practicing from a deficit model focuses social workers on identifying weaknesses and problems, which can then be addressed by a social worker, who is considered to be an expert capable of fixing problems (Keddell, 2014). Practicing in this manner is inconsistent with many of the values of social work. It disempowers clients by taking away their ability to define their own problems and by failing to recognise that clients are experts in their own lives (Cohen, 1998).

Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) questioned whether it is possible for social work to be based on equal power relationships. They believed that it is difficult for clients to truly be equal partners in the relationship as social work, by its very nature, is top down. Social work incorporates an element of social control in its processes, and social workers are trained to be experts who are expected to use their knowledge and skills to do their jobs. If this is the case, the question becomes what can social workers do to manage their power within the relationship with their clients to ensure that positive outcomes for clients are achieved?

## Strategies for Managing Power Relationships

### **Social Worker Skills and Qualities**

There is evidence that social workers can positively influence outcomes for clients through the use of their social work skills (Trotter, 2002). This is so even when clients

are involuntary recipients of services (Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006; Trotter, 2002). Maiter, Palmer and Manji (2006) found that clients recognised a variety of positive qualities that social workers brought to their relationships with them. Among these were caring, being genuine, empathy, helpfulness, willingness to listen, being non-judgemental and accepting. In a Canadian study by Palmer, Brown, Rae-Grant and Loughlin (2001) clients indicated that a good therapist validates clients' experiences, listens to their clients and is empathetic. They were also described as respectful, empowering, non-judgemental, acknowledged clients' feelings and helped clients to control their feelings without attempting to controlling them. Therapists who interacted with clients in this way were highly regarded by their clients (Palmer et al., 2001). Trotter (2002) also identified that relationship skills and a willingness to work collaboratively with clients as being essential for obtaining positive outcomes for involuntary clients. If the above skills are used to build a more collaborative relationship where the clients feel able to participate, the power differential between client and social worker is reduced and outcomes for clients are likely to be more positive (Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006; Trotter, 2002).

## **Empowerment**

Foucault (1994) believed that power is created within relationships, and is accessible to all parties in a relationship. Those who are assumed to lack power have the power to resist being coerced by the more powerful. This does not imply that power is distributed equally in the relationship between social worker and client, but suggests that clients do not have to be passive victims of social work intervention (Healy, 1998). Clients are empowered when they are able to secure resources that give them control over their

lives (Hasenfeld, 1987; Payne, 2014). Empowered clients are able to participate in decision making and make choices about the type of services they require and how these should be delivered to create positive outcomes (Payne, 2014). However, many clients do not have the capacity to realise their power unaided. Personal, economic and social disadvantage may make it difficult for some clients to have the confidence to work in a participatory manner with social workers (Healy, 1998). Hasenfeld (1987) identified several strategies that social workers could use to help clients to gain power over their environments. These included: providing clients with information about the resources that are available to them; explaining their entitlements; and helping them to develop the skills and knowledge needed to obtain positive outcomes. Social workers who work in an empowering way allow clients to participate in decision making processes. Client participation and self-determination are valued and social workers are open to being influenced by their clients. If social workers are aware of power relationships, they can ensure that they work in ways that empower, rather than oppress, their clients (Payne, 2014).

## **Supervision**

Social workers are frequently exposed to stressful situations while performing their jobs (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Supervision provides social workers with support to cope with the emotional impact of their work (Collins, 2008) At times, they are required to make decisions which may have a serious impact on clients' lives. This is a source of stress for many social workers, as they are aware of the effect their decisions will potentially have on clients and their families. Participating in supervision enables social workers to confirm that they have made the right decision, gives them access to

the opinion of a more experienced social worker (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014) and gives them the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice (Chiller & Crisp, 2012; Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006). When a supervisor shares the responsibility for difficult decisions, social workers' stress levels are likely to be reduced (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Good supervision meets social workers' emotional and support needs (O'Donoghue, Munford & Trlin, 2006).

All of the participants in Beddoe, Davys and Adamson's (2014) New Zealand study mentioned that supervisors were "sounding boards" (p. 119), who listened to their concerns and gave them the opportunity to reflect on their practice. This was seen as important by the participants, as it helped them to cope with the emotionally difficult aspects of their jobs and helped to build resilience (Beddoe, Davys & Adamson, 2014). Likewise, all of the participants in Chiller and Crisp's (2012) Australian study indicated that they felt that having supervision was important for their wellbeing, as it gave them the opportunity to share and explore their concerns and discuss the aspects of their jobs that are stressful to them. The purpose of supervision is to contribute to social workers' continued sense of wellbeing and make sure that they maintain job satisfaction. A worker who feels happy, motivated and supported in their job is more able to provide clients with an effective service (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014; O'Donoghue, Munford & Trlin, 2006), which results in positive client outcomes (O'Donoghue, Munford & Trlin, 2006).

## Conclusion

This chapter discussed literature that is relevant to the consideration of how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients. The chapter was divided

into two sections. The first section explored organisational and political power; control of resources; decision making; goal setting and planning; and professionals as experts, which were identified in the literature as being sources and evidence of power. The second section examined literature that identified strategies for managing power relationships. Included in this section were: social worker skills; empowerment and supervision.

The following chapter describes the research design and methodology; introduces the participants; describes data collection and analysis; discusses relevant ethical considerations; and identifies the limitations of the study.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients and to identify strategies to manage power to create positive outcomes for clients. The chapter begins with a discussion of the methodology and research design. The recruitment method and participant selection criteria are then described. This is followed by a description of the data collection method and the data analysis process. Ethical considerations related to this research are discussed. Finally, limitations of the current study are identified.

### Methodology and Research Design

The research was conducted using a qualitative methodology, which enables a researcher to collect detailed descriptive data that reflects an individual's perceptions and understandings of their world (Bell, 2014). In contrast, a quantitative research method requires participant responses to be collected in a form that can be measured and quantified. A quantitative approach is able to yield data that is more precise and representative of a population, (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). However, in this case quantitative data would not have adequately addressed the research question, as the data of interest were not able to be measured numerically. Qualitative research is, to a large extent, built on an inductive process (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2014). The researcher was interested in accessing participants' own interpretations of the nature of power in the relationship between social workers and clients, rather than trying to fit their responses into pre-existing theories or themes. The research process was also, to a

point, deductive. The researcher read extensively about the nature of power and how it is evident between people, prior to beginning data collection. This is likely to have shaped the interview questions and influenced the researcher's focus (Ormston, et al., 2014). The research was underpinned by an interpretive paradigm, which recognises that reality and knowledge are constructed through social interaction (Tracy, 2013). The interpretations and perspectives of both the participants and the researcher shape the research process and influence perceptions of reality (Ormston, et al., 2014).

Understanding reality in this way was important to the research process, as it reminded the researcher that she had an active role in the research and that a shared reality was created through her interaction with the participants, which affected their responses (Gibbs, 2005). An interpretive paradigm was considered suitable for the research, as power is not an entity, but is created within relationships between people (Foucault, 1994).

## Research Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. This involved deliberately targeting participants who were likely to have the knowledge required to answer the research question (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Suitability for selection was based on whether a participant met predetermined criteria (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant & Rahim, 2014). The researcher wished to interview qualified social workers who had at least two years' experience working in a social work role. The research aimed to capture the perspectives of social workers in general, therefore social workers with experience in any field of social work were considered to be suitable participants. Initially, the researcher emailed a letter to managers of organisations which employ

social workers, requesting that they forward an information sheet and interview schedule to social workers within their organisations who met the selection criteria. Those interested in participating were asked to email the researcher. This method of communicating interest was preferred to agency managers sending the researcher a list of prospective participants, as it protected the privacy of participants by ensuring that managers were unaware of who had decided to participate. This recruitment method yielded two participants. A further two participants were referred to the researcher by a social worker who did not participate in the research. She provided the contact details of two social workers that she thought would be interested in participating. The prospective participants were contacted via cell phone. An information sheet and interview schedule were emailed to each of them, after they had indicated an interest in participating and prior to the interviews taking place.

## Data Collection

Data collection commenced after the research project was placed on the low risk ethics register at Massey University (see Appendix). This notification occurred after an ethical analysis, involving consultation with the researcher's supervisor and peers, was completed. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. This enabled the researcher to target relevant information and add flexibility to the process. The use of semi-structured interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to probe responses to elicit a greater depth of information from the participants (O'Leary, 2017). Following further explanation of the research project, the participants each signed a consent form prior to being interviewed. The interviews took between 25 and 40 minutes to complete and were held at a mutually agreed location. Two of the interviews were conducted at

the participants' workplaces, and two were conducted at the researcher's workplace, with the agreement of her manager. All interviews were recorded, with the participants' permission, on an Endeavour voice recorder. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, excluding ums and stutters, and then emailed back to the participants to be checked. It was made clear to each participant that they were entitled to alter their transcript if they thought it necessary. If they were happy for their transcripts to be used in the research report, they were requested to sign a transcript release form and email it back to the researcher.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes within the data that related to the research question. This method was chosen because it enabled the researcher to develop a "rich description" (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 79) of the data, while also recognising the subjectivity of the researcher in the identification and definition of themes. The process was inductive; themes were developed from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview transcripts were studied, and themes that were relevant to the research aims were identified and coded. The themes of individual transcripts were compared and common themes were identified. These final themes were analysed and the analysis was incorporated into the results section of the report, with supporting quotes to illustrate the themes and give voice to the participants.

## Ethics

Consideration of the ethical issues likely to affect the research was informed by the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (Massey University, 2015), which the researcher read prior to beginning the research project. An ethical analysis of the proposed research was presented to a group of peers, and feedback was received from the group. The researcher discussed the ethical analysis and feedback with her supervisor. The research was considered to be low risk, as participants were qualified social workers, who were asked to give their general impressions and perceptions. Therefore, a low risk notification was sought and received before data collection commenced (see Appendix). Following is a discussion of how the ethical issues identified were addressed.

### **Informed Consent**

Participants were provided with an information sheet prior to the commencement of the interviews. The sheet explained the purpose and details of the research and how the findings would be used. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study without penalty and to decline to answer any of the interview questions. An interview schedule was also provided to give them the opportunity to decide whether they were interested in the research. Each participant was required to sign a consent form before being interviewed and each agreed to complete this.

### **Confidentiality**

The names of the participants and other identifying information was stored separately from the interview transcripts. Participant voices were presented in this report using pseudonyms assigned by the researcher. The researcher did not reveal the names of the

participants to any third party. All details that enabled participants to be identified were omitted from the report

### **Security and Storage of Data**

Digital devices used for the storage of electronic data were password protected and were deleted when examination of the research project was completed. Printed material was locked in the researcher's home and was not accessible to anyone except the researcher. The data will be shredded after examination of the research project.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The research participants were not known to the researcher, either professionally or personally. Therefore, no conflict of interest was apparent.

### **Risk of Harm**

The research was anticipated to be low risk, due to the topic being explored. However, the interviewer was prepared to stop an interview in the event of a participant becoming upset. The researcher also explained to each participant that they were entitled to decline to answer any of the questions, or to end the interview at any time.

### **Beneficence**

Participating in the research potentially gave participants the opportunity to reflect on their practice and to consider possibilities for addressing power differentials, to create positive outcomes for their clients.

### **Integrity**

Findings from the participants were reported honestly and accurately to reflect the understood meanings intended by participants. To ensure this the researcher asked for

clarification of any points that were unclear during the interview. The interview transcripts were emailed to the participants for comment and editing, before the data was used.

## Limitations

Qualitative research methods have been criticised for being unscientific and subjective. This may be seen as a potential limitation of this research. The interpretive paradigm recognises that reality is socially constructed (Tracy, 2013) and that researchers may influence the research process (Ormston, et al., 2014). Researchers also acknowledge that qualitative research processes are subjective, as research reflects both the values and biases of the researcher (Gibbs, 2005). To counter this and ensure that the research reflected the views and perceptions of the participants, the researcher followed a structured process of data analysis. Themes were developed from the data and were relevant to the aims of the research and the research question. Systematic and comprehensive coverage of the data was obtained by ensuring that each transcript was subjected to the same analytical treatment (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor & Barnard, 2014). The findings of the research are illustrated with quotes from the participants. This ensures that the participants voices are heard and that their own words are used to explain their perspectives, rather than solely relying on the researcher's interpretation of their meaning.

The findings of the research are not able to be generalised. In part, this is due to the small sample size. To meet the requirements for the current research project only four participants were interviewed. However, findings of qualitative research are generally not intended to be generalised to a larger population, but rather to illustrate the

experiences of individuals (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2007). This was certainly the intention of the current research, which focused on gathering the perspectives of how power is evident in the relationship between social workers and clients.

## Conclusion

This chapter described the methodology and research design. It then explained how the participants were recruited and how it was ensured that they gave their informed consent to participate. Following this, data collection and data analysis methods were described; and an explanation of how ethics, relevant to the study, were considered was given. The chapter concluded with identification of the limitations of the study.

The following chapter presents the findings from the interviews with the participants.

## Chapter Four: Findings

### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients and to identify strategies to manage power to create positive outcomes for clients. Four participants were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview process, and a thematic analysis was carried out to identify common themes in their responses. The chapter begins with an introduction to the participants, whose real names were not used to protect their privacy. Following this is a consideration of different sources of power. Participants' perceptions of how power is evident in their relationships with clients are then presented, along with a brief consideration of the effect that power has on the relationship, the client and the social worker. The chapter concludes by identifying the strategies that can be used for managing power and creating positive outcomes for clients.

### Participants

The participants were all qualified social workers, who worked in a variety of fields of practice. Kate and Talia worked in the mental health field with voluntary clients; Jo worked in the domestic violence field with voluntary clients; and Tessa worked with youth, who were required to engage with her. All four participants were relatively new to their positions; time in the role ranged from five months to two years. However, all participants had held social work roles prior to their current position.

## Sources of Power

Talia spoke of the omnipresence of power in social work practice; she and Jo noted that everybody possesses power. Sources of power that were identified by the participants were: legislation; systemic and organisational; positional; and expert power.

### **Legislation, Systemic and Organisational Power**

All of the participants acknowledged that legislation gives social workers both power and responsibility. The particular legislation mentioned by the participants differed, depending on which field of social work they worked in, but responses from the participants indicated common understandings of the way legislation influences practice and how this affected outcomes for their clients. At times legislation required participants to exert their power, even when they were not particularly comfortable doing so, as explained by Kate:

*I've had someone, in my previous role, admitted to the inpatient ward and that hasn't always been nice because some people agree to go and some don't. That's been really hard, not only for the client, but for myself because again it's that whole sort of legislation thing (Kate).*

Kate went on to describe the lack of control that some people encountered as clients within the mental health system:

*Sometimes I've had clients say to me in the mental health system that they feel there's a bit of a power dynamic because they feel like they're always being told what to do (Kate).*

Talia spoke of the requirement for social workers to action Community Treatment Orders in accordance with the Mental Health Act 1992, which forces clients to take medication or attend counselling. Tessa explained that the expectations of the Government shape her role:

*The Government expects that they do certain things to get their benefit. So, I've got a certain role to ensure they're meeting that obligation with their benefit (Tessa)*

Jo and Talia noted that social workers who work with involuntary clients have a higher level of power than those who work with voluntary clients. Talia described social work with involuntary clients as being “more top-down”, while Jo explained that because she works with voluntary clients, legislation is a guide:

*We're not a statutory agency, so it's voluntary for them to engage with me. If they are working with a statutory agency, those social workers do have a level of power that we don't ... I'm guided by legislation, but I'm not sure it actually gives me a huge amount of power to do anything because it's the client's choice (Jo).*

Although Tessa did not work for a statutory agency, it was compulsory for her clients to engage with her. Those who failed to engage had their benefits sanctioned. Tessa saw this as positive because it enabled her to ascertain their safety:

*Something's going on and I cannot get hold of her... So, I've sanctioned her benefit and hopefully by sanctioning her benefit she'll be like, “oh I'm not getting any money” and she'll pop up to the office. So, it can also be a safety thing because young people, anything can happen (Tessa).*

All of the participants spoke of how legislation gave them the power to act if they believed that a person was unsafe. Jo explained:

*Legislation means that I have the power, and also, I have the obligation that if I have a concern for their safety, that they're going to harm themselves or that they're going to harm somebody else, then I have the duty to inform (Jo).*

The duty to inform overrode a client's right to confidentiality:

*I had to exercise that power in my right to break confidentiality at that point in time because she'd ended that conversation, which clearly, trying to take her life the day before, with the distress at that point in time ... that was sufficient for me to ring these other people and break confidentiality and I guess exercise my power as a therapist (Talía)*

### **Positional Power**

The participants discussed how being in the role of social worker gave them power.

Tessa commented that the level of positional power a social worker has depends upon their role. Kate and Talía felt that the role of social worker comes with power attached.

Talía added that there is a "level of status" that comes with the position of social worker. Jo spoke of the perception that clients, and society in general, have of the power that social workers hold:

*I think that from a client's perspective just the title 'social worker' brings with it power. I'm sure that we are all aware that there is a bit of a misconception out there of social workers, they'll take your babies, that*

*sort of thing. So, I think that as a profession we are attributed with a lot of power we don't actually have (Jo).*

Jo went on to talk about the positive effects that having power can bring:

*When I go along to an appointment ... there's a respect for our role ... I'm seen as their equal ... just the mere fact that I can ring somebody up and say, "hi I'm a social worker with (name of agency)" means that they are going to give me the time of day, they're going to hear what I have to say (Jo).*

Both Jo and Kate felt that there was sometimes a negative side to possessing positional power. Jo talked of being committed to working from an empowerment perspective, where clients have self-determination and choice in their relationship with her. Because of her role as a social worker, clients sometimes assume that they have to engage with her. Kate gave an example of when she had seen positional power used negatively. In that situation, the worker involved gave the impression that "I'm a professional, you're not" and proceeded to talk in a derogatory manner to the client, raising her chair so that she was looking down on the client.

### **Knowledge and Expert Power**

Kate and Talia felt that the education and training that social workers receive gives them power. Kate felt that there was a power differential between social workers and "those that are less knowledgeable". Talia spoke of client's perceptions of the knowledge and expertise that social workers possess:

*People still kind of look at you like you're meant to have this basket of knowledge (Talía).*

Kate felt the pressure of being regarded as an expert and stated:

*I don't have the answers, not always. I call myself a work in progress. I tell our clients that as well because we are all, none of us are perfect (Kate).*

For Talía, client's perceptions of herself as an expert manifested in them expecting her to fix their lives for them. This was echoed by Jo:

*We are working with somebody who is very vulnerable and they see us as that person that's going to be able to help, maybe fix things (Jo).*

Jo also spoke of the information she has gained through education, research and experience being used positively to advocate for clients.

## Evidence of Power

The participants identified the ways that power was evident in the relationship between social workers and clients as being: control of resources, control of decision making and planning processes, and through the ability of social workers to be directive.

### **Control of Resources**

Kate and Tessa identified that social workers have power over clients when they have control of funds for essential items and services, and control over the payment of clients' benefits. Tessa stated, "I actually have power over their money". Tessa had the power to sanction a client's benefit if they did not conform to the rules and expectations

set by the Government. Tessa saw this as a positive capacity because when a client found out that they were not getting their benefit, they would contact her. This enabled Tessa to check that they were safe. Jo also noted the positive aspects of having control of resources needed by clients. She believed that her status as a social worker, along with the relationships that she had developed with other professionals, meant that she was able to access services for clients that they would not have been able to access alone:

*We do hold power and I know that I can make a phone call that is possibly going to make something happen for a client than if I didn't, but I guess we just try to use our power in a positive way (Jo).*

Talia also spoke of how she had used her connections and networking skills positively to help a client gain the opportunity to secure some voluntary work.

### **Decision Making, Goal Setting and Planning**

Jo recognised that social workers' power to control decision making processes could be used negatively:

*Negatively in the fact you could pressure people into making decisions and choices that you felt were right for them (Jo)*

Talia noted that involuntary clients were more unlikely to have control over decision making and planning processes:

*I think this is good for you, therefore you should follow this and this and this plan. Regardless of whether the client thinks it's actually good or*

*whether they think they can actually achieve this or whether it's even possible for them (Talía)*

Kate, Tessa and Talía described how they worked in a positive way that enabled clients to participate in decision making processes. Tessa and Talía talked about giving their clients options. For Tessa, this meant presenting options and allowing clients to choose the one that best suited them. Talía gave her clients some suggestions, but left the final decision up to them. Tessa acknowledged that in some respects client choice was limited because clients were required to be in education; they could not decide that they did not want attend. However, she spoke of supporting clients to attain their non-compulsory, self-determined goals:

*I'm really trying to support them with all the other goals that are actually really important to them (Tessa).*

Kate stressed the importance of supporting clients to attain the goals that they had set for themselves, rather than trying to take over the process herself:

*Ask them, "okay what are your goals? What do you want out of life? Okay what does that look like for you? Well how do you think you're going to do that then?" ... get them to be the driver of the bus, if you know what I mean. I can be the passenger (Kate).*

### **Being Directive**

Clients may be directed to engage with social workers to avoid negative consequences or punishment. Both Jo and Talía saw this as applying more to involuntary clients. Jo

questioned how constructive the work is when a client was forced to attend against their will:

*I guess they're there because they have to be. In those situations, the power is evident in the fact you're not really doing any valuable or constructive work, but they're turning up every time because they've been directed to (Jo).*

Clients were required to engage with Tessa. Tessa indicated that she uses her power to enforce the rules, and warns her clients that if they do not attend their appointments their benefits will be sanctioned. Tessa stated that she felt that she is being responsible by enforcing the rules and applying consequences for those who fail to conform. She feared that if she was too lenient her clients would become long-term beneficiaries.

Kate recognised that social workers who work with voluntary clients can be unnecessarily directive at times:

*If we don't check ourselves as social workers and suddenly we find ourselves in a position we're almost directing a person what to do with their lives ... if you're trying to overpower them and do everything for them, that's not what we're here for and that can be real negative (Kate).*

Jo had a similar view:

*Dropping something in there like if you didn't do this, then I would have no option but to contact (name of agency) and at times that's a fact, but if it worked you could use that to get people to do stuff that you felt was right for them (Jo).*

## **Client Power**

All of the participants believed that clients have power within their relationships with social workers, but sometimes they do not realise that they do. All four participants mentioned that clients could decline services or decline to work with a particular social worker. Tessa had experienced this in her previous position:

*They could choose to tell you, "I don't want you to be my support worker"  
... and that happens for everyone (Tessa).*

Clients could also assert their power by refusing to cooperate or participate. Kate found this happened when she was trying to move her clients forward and they found this uncomfortable. They would then sometimes withdraw from her, not answer the door, phone calls or texts. Talia said that clients would decline to participate by "not sharing things they don't want to share". Jo spoke of the difficulties of developing a relationship with involuntary clients who do not want to engage:

*It would be very hard to build rapport and get buy in from somebody that's working with you involuntarily ... when clients are working there against their will it's not an authentic relationship. There's a sort of you tick the boxes, you go through the motions (Jo).*

Jo believed that clients are able to exert their power by laying a complaint if they were unhappy with the service or the social worker. She said that she informed clients their right to lay a complaint at her initial meeting with them. Talia said that her agency had formal evaluation forms, which clients were able to access to give feedback.

## Effects of Power

### **Effects on the Relationship**

The clients that Jo worked with had experienced environments where power was negatively used against them. Therefore, it was very important to Jo that she use her power to create a positive experience for them. She strived to create a trusting atmosphere where clients felt listened to and cared about, so that they would be willing to reach out to others.

Kate felt that using her power to have somebody hospitalised sometimes ruined her relationship with them:

*They can hate us because they feel that we've had that working relationship and closeness, but now we're going against them, we're doing it to them ... sometimes a successful relationship is purely built on rapport and you can't really get anywhere with anyone unless you've got a good rapport (Kate)*

### **Effects on the Client**

Tessa identified that her power could be used positively to create positive change for her clients:

*The power that we have is we will try and do everything we can to get a young person educated, get their licence, have them reach their goals ... so that when they leave us they are not on their benefit anymore ... I will practice that power because I know that that's the only time I'm going to maybe even get a young person to push themselves into what they're capable of (Tessa).*

Talia also believed that the positive use of power enabled her to give her clients a push to move them forward.

### **Effects on the Social Worker**

Kate, Tessa and Talia described how using their power affected them. Using her power to have a client hospitalised affected Kate:

*Really played on my emotions and you over-think things, and even though you're doing the best for them it can still be an emotional upheaval for you inside (Kate).*

Tessa found using her power for the first time difficult and stressful:

*I felt like oh my gosh she gets anxiety... I thought am I going to make this person suicidal if I sanction them? I started freaking out (Tessa).*

Talia had experienced both positive and negative effects of having power. She spoke about the negative effects that she experienced when clients in crises put their problems on her. This was especially difficult when several clients were having crises at the same time. The thought that she would be accountable if she made a mistake and somebody got hurt, also made Talia aware that there is a negative side to having power.

Conversely, she felt that clients had the ability to influence her and her practice in a positive manner.

## Strategies for Managing Power to Create Positive Outcomes

### **Social Worker Skills and Qualities**

The participants identified several skills that they thought were important aids to managing power relationships and creating positive outcomes for clients.

Communication skills were key for both Jo and Talia. Talia explained:

*Communication. It's all down to communication ... that for me, the communication is vital ... I try to be as open with my communication as possible. I always ask for permission for doing exercises (Talia).*

Jo also spoke of her use of communication skills:

*Just listen in a non-judgemental way. I think it's about how I manage that relationship with them (Jo).*

Other skills mentioned by the participants as being useful in the management of power were: the ability to help clients build confidence and self-esteem; willingness to challenge another professional if they treated a client unfairly; the ability to validate and respect clients; valuing what clients are passionate about; and being honest.

### **Empowerment**

Jo talked of her agency's commitment to operating in accordance with an empowerment model:

*We work under the model of empowerment, so just because I think it's right for them, it's not about that, it's about the client. We are so much about voluntary engagement and empowerment (Jo)*

Both Jo and Talia commented that clients are sometimes unaware that they have power. They saw it as their job to help clients access their power. Kate said that she understood social work to be about empowering people, rather than overpowering them. Jo and Kate believed that empowered clients would be able to access services independently. Kate noted the importance of encouraging clients to think for themselves. This thought was reflected by Talia:

*It's not my job to fix their lives. It's my job to help them think and help them reflect and kind of come into their own power (Talia).*

Empowering clients also meant working in partnership and sharing power for Kate and Talia. Kate stated:

*All the resources that we've got, power can be used in a positive light because we can share that with the client and encourage them to have more confidence to develop their skills. Instead of us doing it for them, we can do it with them (Kate).*

Talia saw this as involving the recognition that both parties had something to contribute to the relationship:

*Not seeing yourself as above or below, but kind of I come with different knowledge, you come with different knowledge, let's see what we can do together (Talia).*

## **Supervision**

Three of the participants saw supervision as an important tool for managing power relationships and reflecting on their actions. Kate spoke of the value of supervision:

*I think it's really good, when we're out there working with so many people, to have structured supervision ... It's good to have that time to check yourself and check your practice and also have someone else to have a bit of a microscope on your practice and think ... why did you say that and did you think that was a good idea? I think supervision is a huge one to help develop positive strategies (Kate).*

Tessa and Talia identified supervision, and talking things over with their team leader and their colleagues, as being particularly important when they had had to make difficult decisions. Tessa said that talking through a situation in depth confirmed that her fears were not reality.

## Conclusion

This chapter presented participants' responses regarding the sources of power, their perceptions of how power is evident in their relationships with clients, and how they believed that having power affects the relationship, the client and themselves. It concluded with the identification of strategies that help social workers manage power in their relationships to create positive outcomes for clients.

The following chapter provides a discussion of the above findings and links them to research and theory.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients and to identify strategies to manage power to create positive outcomes for clients. This chapter presents a discussion of the findings of the research, drawing on both the voices of the participants and the identified relevant literature. It begins by discussing the sources of power and how power is evident in the relationship between social workers and clients, based on the responses of the participants. This leads into a consideration of how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients; the effects that power has on clients; and the effects that power has on social workers. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding the management of power to create positive outcomes for clients.

### Sources of Power

There are several different sources of power, which may potentially give social workers access to power. Below there is a discussion of how legislation, systemic and organisational power; and knowledge and expert power, may give social workers power.

### **Legislation, Systemic and Organisational Power**

Social work practice is shaped by the organisations in which social workers practice.

As representatives of an organisation, social workers have the power to act, but are also

bound by the rules and regulations of the organisation. This has an impact on the relationship between social workers and their clients (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009). In turn, organisational processes are shaped by government policies and legislation (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009). All of the participants, in the current study, mentioned legislation as a source of power for social workers. Although the participants worked in different fields of practice, they had a common understanding of the way legislation requires social workers to exert their power. At times participants found this difficult; they indicated that they did not always feel comfortable exerting power. Even so, the participants recognised that legislation gives them the power to act when they believe that a client, or another person, is unsafe. Therefore, the authority that social workers hold makes their relationships with clients unequal (Hasenfeld, 1987), but, according to the participants, this can be positive, as it enables social workers to act to ensure safety.

Statutory social workers, as representatives of the Government, have the authority to use coercive power to force clients to cooperate (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009). This was noted by one of the participants in this study, who felt that social work with involuntary clients is more controlled by social workers and legislation, than social work with voluntary clients. There was the belief that statutory social workers have a higher level of power than those who work in non-government organisations. Three of the participants worked with voluntary clients. One of the participants stated that she worked from an empowerment model. Working from an empowerment perspective means respecting that clients have choice; and being willing to help them to make their own decisions about which services they require and how these will be delivered (Payne, 2014). As the participant worked in this manner, she strongly believed that her practice was very different from that of statutory social

workers. The participant saw her use of power as being more positive, and felt that legislation did not give her much power, as it only guided her practice.

### **Knowledge and Expert Power**

Foucault (1969) believed that knowledge creates power. Three of the participants felt that there is a power differential between social workers and clients, due to the knowledge and training that social workers possess. The participants spoke of the perceptions of clients and other members of society, who saw them as experts. They felt that there was the expectation from clients that social workers were able to fix their lives for them. Keddell (2014) claimed that social workers who practice from a deficit model focus on the problems and weaknesses of clients, and set themselves up as experts who can fix clients' problems. This was not the case for the participants of the current study, who stressed that they did not have all of the answers and did not believe it was their job to fix problems for clients. Instead the participants spoke of supporting clients to develop strategies, so that they were empowered to solve their own problems. This is more congruent with the strengths perspective, which recognises that clients are the experts when it comes to their own lives (Saleeby, 2002). Participants sought to share their power as much as possible with their clients, through a strengths approach to practice.

## Evidence of Power

Participants identified that power is evident in a relationship when one party in the relationship has control of the resources needed by the other; and control over decision making processes.

### **Control of Resources**

In a study by Cohen (1998), it was found that workers had power over clients because they had control of the housing resources needed by clients, and were able to either bestow or withhold these. Similar to Cohen (1998), responses from two of the participants in the current study suggested that power is evident in the relationship between social workers and clients through social workers' control over resources. Regardless of whether control is used positively to bestow resources, or negatively to withhold them, social workers have power over their clients when they are the sole holders of resources in the relationship (Smith, 2008). This indicates that there is a power differential, where the social worker may be seen as the dominant party, and client as the subjugated party in the relationship (Smith, 2008).

Two of the participants in the current study believed that social workers have power over clients because they have control of money that clients need to obtain essential items. One participant spoke of withholding clients' benefits to make them comply with governmental rules and expectations. Like participants in a study by Gladstone, Fitzgerald and Brown (2013), this participant did not see this as being negative or coercive. She believed that withholding clients' benefits may be positive and beneficial to them. Generally, when her clients found that they did not have any money they would visit the office. This enabled the participant to check that they were safe.

Two participants identified that having the ability to use their connections and networks, for the benefit of clients was a positive aspect of having control of resources. Participants spoke about advocating for clients so that they received the resources that they needed. This reflects the findings of Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano and Bubar (2013), who noted that social workers' networking skills enabled clients to gain access to resources that they would not have been able to access on their own.

### **Decision Making, Goal Setting and Planning**

All of the participants in this study recognised that the social worker's ability to control decision making processes could be used negatively. Several researchers of previous studies also found this to be the case (Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano & Bubar, 2013; Cohen, 1998; Dumbrill, 2006). This was evident by workers taking control of the decision making and goal setting processes; by excluding clients from intervention planning; presenting them with a completed plan at the initial meeting; and failing to discuss clients' views and wishes with them (Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano & Bubar, 2013; Cohen, 1998; Dumbrill, 2006). Participants in the present study agreed that social workers could use their power to tell clients what to do or to pressure them into making decisions that reflected the agenda of the social worker, rather than the needs and wishes of the client. Participant responses were consistent with the view that when clients have no control over decisions which concern them they are disempowered and left feeling that their opinions do not matter (Cohen, 1998; Dumbrill, 2006).

Social workers are guided by social work values and ethics. They are expected to practice in ways that empower their clients to exercise their right to self-determination (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2007). Unsurprisingly, three of

the participants in the present study indicated that they practiced in a manner consistent with social work values. They spoke of how they allowed clients to make their own decisions. One of the participants described how she supported clients to develop their own goals. The other two participants described how they gave their clients choices and suggestions, but left the final decision up to them. Hasenfeld (1987) suggested that ensuring that clients have a voice in decision making processes lessens the power differential between social workers and clients and empowers clients to make their own decisions.

The discussion above considers how social workers are given power and identifies some of the ways in which power is evident in the relationship between social workers and clients. Considering the sources and evidence of power is necessary if an understanding of how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients is to be gained, and for strategies to manage power and create positive outcomes for clients to be identified.

## Effects of Power

Previous research and literature has not tended to focus on the effects of power.

However, the participants of the present study identified ways that power affected the relationship, the client and the social worker.

### **Effects on the Relationship**

Two participants spoke of how their relationships with clients were affected by the power differential between them. One participant believed that her power enabled her

to make a positive impact on the relationship by giving her clients a positive experience of engaging with a social service provider. Her way of practicing echoed Payne's (2014) assertion that positive outcomes for clients are created when they are empowered to make their own choices. The participant's hope was that by empowering her clients, they would be willing to reach out to other service providers for help.

The other participant felt that sometimes using the power that she was given by legislation ruined her relationship with clients. She believed that clients built a relationship with her and developed trust, and because of this they thought that she was going against them, and siding with the medical profession, when they were hospitalised. Like Gladstone, Fitzgerald and Brown (2013), the participant felt that the relationship was affected because it was built on the rapport between herself and the client; if the rapport was broken then it was difficult to achieve positive outcomes for the client.

### **Effects on the Client**

Two of the participants described how their use of power had a positive effect on their clients. They felt that power could be used to create positive change. Both spoke about using their power to push their clients forward. Healy (1998) identified that coercive power could be used to create positive change. Like Healy (1998). One of the participants described how she willingly used coercive power over her clients.

Interestingly, she saw her power to sanction a client's benefit as being positive because it gave her the opportunity to check that they were safe. This is a similar view to Healy (1998), who indicated that coercive power in statutory child protection work was not

always negative. She suggested that the use of coercive power could, at times, create positive change to keep children safe.

### **Effects on the Social Worker**

Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson and Hardiman (2009) recognised that the power dynamic between social workers and clients could be difficult for social workers to manage, as they are often not trained to handle their power over their clients. Three of the participants in the current study described the challenges that they faced when they were required to use their power over their clients, against the client's will. The participants all spoke of the responsibility that they had for ensuring the safety of their clients, as being stressful. One participant said that she experienced an emotional upheaval when she had to have a client hospitalised. Another said that she wondered if her actions would cause a client to become suicidal. Participants in an Australian study by Chiller and Crisp (2012) and a New Zealand study by Beddoe, Davys and Adamson (2014) also talked about the emotionally challenging parts of their jobs.

### **Strategies for Managing Power to Create Positive Outcomes**

Participants identified several strategies that could be used to manage power relationships to create positive outcomes for clients. This section discusses how this was accomplished by participants through the use of social worker skills and qualities; empowerment; and supervision were used by participants.

## **Social Worker Skills and Qualities**

Social workers can positively influence outcomes for their clients through the use of their social work skills (Trotter, 2002). The participants identified a number of skills that helped social workers manage the power differentials in their relationships with clients, to create positive outcomes for clients. Communication skills were thought to be important by two of the participants. In common with previous research, participants in the present study also identified: willingness to listen (Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006); honesty (Trotter, 2002); validation (Palmer, Brown, Rae-Grant & Loughlin, 2001); and being non-judgemental (Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006; Palmer et al., 2001).

## **Empowerment**

Foucault (1994) believed that power is omnipresent and that power is able to be accessed by all parties within a relationship. Two of the participants in the current study echoed Foucault's (1994) belief. They felt that everybody possesses power, but recognised that sometimes clients are unaware of their power. Healy (1998) noted that not all clients have the capacity to access their power unaided. The participants assisted their clients to access their own power by helping them to develop skills, so that they were able to make decisions and access services independently; and also by encouraging clients to think for themselves. Like Payne (2014) they believed that clients are empowered when they are able to share power with social workers and participate in decision making processes. One of the participants indicated that she valued clients' opinions and was willing to incorporate their ideas into her therapy sessions. She recognised that both social workers and clients have valuable knowledge and noted that her clients influence her practice in a positive manner, by challenging

her to think differently about a situation. Being able to share power with social workers and have real choice in how services are delivered contributes to positive outcomes for clients, as clients are more likely to work towards goals that they have set themselves (Payne, 2014).

## **Supervision**

Supervision is not often mentioned in social science or social work research that specifically examines power between workers and clients. However, three of the participants in the current study mentioned use of supervision as a way of managing their power. An important aspect of supervision, according to participants in Beddoe, Davys and Adamson's (2014) New Zealand study, was that it helped to build social workers resilience. This is because supervision provides social workers with support to cope with the emotional impact of their work (Collins, 2008; O'Donoghue, Munford & Trlin, 2006).

The participants found that having to exert their power over clients was stressful at times. Supervision was useful to them when they had to make difficult decisions because it gave them access to the opinions of more experienced practitioners, which enabled them to confirm that they had made the right decision. It also gave them a chance to reflect on their actions, to ensure that they were working effectively and fairly with their clients. This echoes the findings of Chiller and Crisp's (2012) study, where participants indicated that they used supervision to explore their concerns and to discuss the aspects of their jobs that were stressful to them. Supervision contributes to social workers' wellbeing and ensures that they continue to practice effectively. Therefore, it is an important strategy for managing power relationships (Kadushin &

Harkness, 2014; O'Donoghue, Munford & Trlin, 2006) and creating positive outcomes for clients (O'Donoghue, Munford & Trlin, 2006).

## Conclusion

This chapter provided a discussion of the findings of the research. It identified the participants view of sources of power and how power is evident in the relationship between social workers and clients. This led to a discussion about how power affects clients, social workers, and their relationships with each other. Finally, social worker skills and qualities, empowerment and supervision were discussed as strategies for managing power to create positive outcomes for clients.

The following chapter draws conclusions based on the above discussion.

## Chapter Six: Conclusions

### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients and to identify strategies to manage power to create positive outcomes for clients. The data were gained from the semi-structured interviews of four participants, each of whom worked in different fields of practice. This chapter draws conclusions based on an analysis of the participants' responses, and how these are linked to previous literature. Following this some recommendations are made.

### Conclusions

The sources and evidence of power identified by participants in this study were similar to those noted in previous research. However, previous research and literature does not directly address how having to use their power affects social workers. This research found that having to use power over their clients may have a negative effect on social workers. The authority that a social worker possesses through being a representative of an organisation, with the legal power of legislation behind them, contributes to a power dynamic between social workers and clients. This can be difficult for social workers to handle (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009). Being required to use their power over clients can be difficult for social workers; making decisions that have potentially life changing consequences for clients can be stressful.

Social worker skills and empowerment were mentioned by participants as being useful strategies for managing power relationships, and creating positive outcomes for clients. These strategies have been mentioned in several previous studies (see for example

Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006). The participants of this study identified supervision as being essential in helping them manage their power. There is much literature and research concerning supervision, most of which does not directly relate to how this can help social workers manage the effects that their power has on them. Supervision was not specifically asked about during the interview, yet three of the four participants mentioned that it was invaluable in helping them manage their power. Supervision is useful because it gives access to a more experienced social worker, which helps social workers to check their reasoning and planned actions, to ensure that they are fair and reasonable outcomes for clients. This is particularly important when social workers have to make difficult decisions, which could potentially have a serious impact on a client's life.

## Recommendations

There are few studies that consider power in the relationship between social workers and clients, or how power relationships can be managed to create positive outcomes for clients. Of those studies that have considered the effects of power, many are over ten years old. There is a need for more research in this area, as it is important for social workers to be aware of the power differentials when working with clients, so that they can make sure that they are working fairly with clients to create positive outcomes for them. In particular, there is a scarcity of New Zealand research. It would be valuable to be able to access research from a New Zealand perspective, as this would capture the unique experience of social workers working in a cultural and political context specific to New Zealand.

## Conclusion

This final chapter presented conclusions concerning how power affects the relationship between social workers and clients, and how power can be managed to create positive outcomes for clients. It then made some recommendations concerning future research.

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## Appendix One: Low Risk Notification

HoU Review Group

Ethics Notification Number: 4000018136

Title: Power in the Relationship Between Social Worker and Client, From a Social Worker's Perspective

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our system which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

If situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your ethical analysis, please log on to <http://rims.massey.ac.nz> and register the changes in order that they be assessed as safe to proceed.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director (Research Ethics), email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz). "

Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish require evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again answering yes to the publication question to provide more information to go before one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

You are reminded that staff researchers and supervisors are fully responsible for ensuring that the information in the low risk notification has met the requirements and guidelines for submission of a low risk notification.

If you wish to print an official copy of this letter, please login to the RIMS system, and under the Reporting section, View Reports you will find a link to run the LR Report.

Yours sincerely

Dr Brian Finch  
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and  
Director (Research Ethics)

## Appendix Two: Letter to Agency Manager

### Letter to Agency Manager

25 July 2017

#### **Request for Social Worker Participation**

My name is Julie Higham and I am studying towards a Master of Applied Social Work at Massey University. I am undertaking a research project exploring how power affects the relationship between social worker and client, as part of the requirements for completing my degree.

The aims of the project are to:

- Explore how power may have both positive and negative effects on the relationship between social worker and client.
- Identify strategies for managing power relationships to create positive outcomes for clients.

For this project, I would like to interview qualified social workers with at least two years' experience working in a social work role. I am requesting your assistance with forwarding the attached Information Sheet and interview schedule to social workers within your team, who meet these criteria.

I expect that participation will take no longer than two hours. The data obtained from participants will be used in a research report that will be submitted to Massey University for examination. Confidentiality of participants and the agency in which they work will be maintained throughout the research process.

Thank you for considering my request. If you require any further information about the research project please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor, Dr Kathryn Hay.

Yours sincerely

Julie Higham

“This project has been peer reviewed and judged to be low risk. Consequently it has not been reviewed by one of the University’s Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named above is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concern about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 ex 86015, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)”

## Appendix Three: Information Sheet

# **Power in the Relationship Between Social Worker and Client, From a Social Worker's Perspective**

### **INFORMATION SHEET**

Hello. My name is Julie Higham and I am in the final year of a Master of Applied Social Work, at Massey University. I am undertaking a research project, as part of the requirements for my degree. I am interested in exploring how power affects the relationship between social worker and client.

**I would like to invite you to participate in my research project, which seeks social workers' perspectives and insights into how power affects their relationships with their clients.**

The aims of the project are to:

- Explore how power may have both positive and negative effects on the relationship between social worker and client.
- Identify strategies for managing power relationships, to create positive outcomes for clients.

I contacted your agency manager and asked them to distribute an information sheet and interview schedule to social workers within the agency. To qualify as a participant, you need to be a qualified social worker and have least two years' social work experience. If you are interested in participating, please Email me at the address below. The first five respondents who fit the criteria will be selected to participate. Included with this information sheet is an interview schedule. I would value hearing your thoughts and insights.

Participation in the project involves attending an interview, at a mutually agreed time and place. With your agreement, the interview will be audio recorded. You may ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview. It is expected that participation will take less than two hours: approximately one hour for the interview and approximately 30 minutes to review the interview transcript. It is anticipated that interviews will be conducted in November.

The information that you give me will be used to complete a research report, as part of the requirements of my degree. Information will be kept secure. Devices used for the storage of electronic information will be password protected and printed material will be kept locked in my home.

You will receive a copy of the completed research report and may also have copies of your audio recording and interview transcript, if you wish.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study before September 2017;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Please contact me or my supervisor if you have any questions about this project or if you would like to participate:

Researcher

Julie Higham

Supervisor

[Dr Kathryn Hay](#)

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 86015, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).

Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Yours sincerely

Julie Higham

## Appendix Four: Interview Schedule

### **Power in the Relationship Between Social Worker and Client, From a Social Worker's Perspective**

#### **Interview Schedule**

1. What is your current role?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. What previous social work roles have you held?
4. How are social workers given power?
5. In what ways might legislation or policy give power to social workers?
6. How do you think power can be evident between a social worker and client?
7. How does power affect the relationship between the social worker and client?
8. Can you give an example of when you have seen evidence of power in a social worker/client relationship?
9. How can power have a negative effect on the social worker/client relationship? OR How can power have a positive effect on the social worker/client relationship? (depending on the participant's response to question 6).
10. How do you think power can be evident between a social worker and an involuntary client?
11. What strategies might social workers use to manage power relationships to create positive outcomes for clients?
12. Do you have any other comments?

