What is a person?

By Monica Short, Karen Dempsey, Janice Ackland, Emma Rush, Eric Heller and Helen Dwyer.
'As manuhiri I would like to start this talk by paying respect to the mana whenua of Auckland. That is the Ngati Whatua iwi and the hapu of Ngati Whatua ki Oraakei'. 
Purpose

The purpose of this research is to clarify the ambiguity around ‘personhood’ within field education environments using dialogue between the fields of social work, sociology, philosophy, chaplaincy and theology and with additional reference to the approach of NonViolent (sic) Communication.

Research question:
What is a person?
Aim

- To present a multidisciplinary perspective about personhood.
- To deepen students’ and colleagues’ understanding of the person in person-centred and other personalisation approaches.

Photo by artist Raymond Howes
Mind the gap

Addresses a gap which occasionally occurs in literature and education, that is the lack of reference to the person on whom the approaches are centred.
Literature review

*Burning Bright*
Sometimes I picture myself
Like a candle.
I used to be a candle about eight
feet tall—
burning bright.
Now every day I lose a little bit of
me.
Someday the candle will be
very small.
But the flame will be
just as bright.
*(Noon, 2003, as cited in Benson & Killock, 2004).*
Social work

- Liberation of people.
- Regarding some social work literature, any understanding of what constitutes a person or a human being appears often to be assumed, as these terms are consistently used without specific definition.

Photo by artist Raymond Howes
Critical thinking activity

Think of a time when you were with a group of people and that group made you feel important as a person and that your opinion counted. What did it feel like?
Methodology

- Co-operative inquiry.
- Six inquirers (participants)
- Multi-disciplinary approach: social work, sociology, theology, chaplaincy, philosophy and NonViolence (sic).

Figure 1: Co-operative inquiry phases (Short & Healy, 2017)
Theme 1: Humanity and Personhood

- Disconnection approach to humanity versus
- Connection (secular human rights) approach to humanity
- Connection (essential spirituality) approach to humanity

Photo by artist Jan Stead
Theme 2: The Importance of Love for Upholding Personhood

Janice (chaplain and social worker): Every little positive effort everyone makes to understand [and love] others, especially people who feel dehumanised is worthwhile. In prison… A Christian program made the women attending all [personalised] placemats. A young woman looked at [her placemat with her] name and its meaning, all nicely decorated. Tears flowed. She said ‘often I have not been called by my name’. She listed the expletives others often have called her.
Theme 3: A Person-centred Approach Transforms Practice and Field Education

It ensures that the person (i.e., the service user) is central to any action, is listened to by workers and students, and has power in the relationship (Beresford et al., 2011, p. 355).
Theme 4: A Person Is and Is Always Becoming a Person

We argue it is important that practitioners and students do not limit views of personhood to one feature or isolate people’s personhood to one or a few stages of life. We argue that all people have purpose and are interconnected within society and that personhood is expressed in community.
Limitations

- Inquiry is small
- Reflects a discursive moment in time
- Community of like minded colleagues
- Does not represent the full spectrum of thinking

Photo by artist Jan Stead
Recommendations

• Students on placement access cross-disciplinary resources about personhood, particularly on the connected views of personhood.

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

• Encourage students to explicitly define personhood and to develop relevant skills, such as those embedded in the NonViolent communication model.
Celebrate the inherent dignity, worth and autonomy of every person.

(Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, p.12)

Photo by artist Raymond Howes

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References


Questions and chat time

Photo by artist Raymond Howes