

---

## article

---

# First and last and always: streetwork as a methodology for radical community social work practice

Darren John Hill, [d.hill@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:d.hill@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)  
Erika Laredo, [e.laredo@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:e.laredo@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)  
Leeds Beckett University, UK

This conceptual article aims to introduce and explore the practice of social streetwork. Streetwork is located as a historical professional discourse that has contemporary relevance for a rapidly changing and globalised world. As a practice discourse, streetwork occurs across a range of community-based helping professions, including social work, youth work and community work. The social work profession is increasingly becoming clinical and situated within statutory organisations, placing a greater emphasis on outcome-based targets, rather than building relationships. As a result of austerity, traditional youth workers are becoming invisible, often moving into statutory education settings and complex needs welfare agencies. This article will argue that for the broad helping professions to remain relevant, we must engage with vulnerable and complex populations where we find them – at the street level – promoting a direct practice of social justice at a micro-level. Within this discussion, we will define and explore a streetwork approach by examining the methodologies and objectives of streetwork practice. We will argue that by keeping to its origins of using informal and non-formal education as its primary tools, streetwork as an intervention works to combat poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. The article articulates a foundation for practice based on the promotion of low-threshold interventions with complex and hard-to-reach social populations. One of the key themes we will explore is how to locate streetwork practice as a form of social support, accompaniment and tool for promoting social inclusion and social democracy.

**key words** streetwork • social support • social justice • low-threshold intervention  
• social pedagogy

To cite this article: Hill, D.J. and Laredo, E. (2019) First and last and always: streetwork as a methodology for radical community social work practice, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 7(1): 25–39, DOI: 10.1332/204986019X15491042559682

---

## Setting the scene: streetwork

This article will begin by locating the concept of streetwork in its professional practice, and also as an academic discourse within a wider social, political and economic context. It will then further explore the direct application, objectives and methodologies of streetwork as a form of social inclusion and accompaniment. Streetwork is neither

a new concept nor a redefinition of practice; rather, it is a hybrid, floating practice often found within multiple organisations, agencies and methodological traditions, all of which have deep roots in community work practice. In the following discussion, we will explore and locate streetwork as a political, ethical and philosophical activity that seeks to promote social justice in a dialectical educational relationship, which is itself congruent with the philosophy and practices of ‘care of the self’, as articulated in the works of Michel Foucault (1978, 1985, 1986) and Pierre Hadot (1995, 2004). Furthermore, it is a practice with a commitment to working collaboratively with service users, using a more horizontal model of advocacy and empowerment, and thus has the capacity to humanise social relations between the professional and the excluded. In the article, we advocate that limited professional ‘silo’ thinking across broad social, welfare and community services employing ‘helping professionals’ often hinders rather than helps the populations we serve. What we are thus proposing is a model that recognises the relational nature of the work as the core of practice.

It is from within this organisational, social, economic and political context that streetwork has emerged, or some may argue re-emerged (Ferguson, 2004). Over the last 50 years within the UK, we have seen the helping professionals of the emergent welfare state divided and separated into subcategories in their formation, education and practice. While this serves central government and philanthropic funding streams, as well as professional interest groups, it ultimately acts as a point of contention for supporting the individuals and communities we serve, who require supporting and helping relationships within a social context. Indeed, we would argue that it is precisely this relational aspect of the practice that puts it at odds with much of the dominant orthodoxies of neoliberalism, in which politicians, policymakers and stakeholders demand more and more evidence that streetwork is meeting needs and that workers demonstrate this in a variety of ways, including making evident that their practice represents ‘value for money’. A central concern for contemporary streetwork practitioners is how to work in a meaningful way that meets the needs of people who often have complex and chaotic lives, and to be able to develop this work over a longer time frame, when most funders have very specific targets and aims.

We will argue in this article that social work, youth work and community work, as well as support work-related professional roles, have more in common than they hold in difference (Hill et al, 2018). Premised on this thinking, we are working with a definition of streetwork as a coming together of ideas, methodology and interventions, and will thus argue here that this approach requires recognition and articulation in order to claim it as a distinct practice. Historically, a streetwork approach was the point of origin for many of the community-based ‘helping’ professions; as such, it can be considered as the genesis of these practices (Garland, 1985; Ferguson, 2004). Social streetwork is a fluid concept and practice, and this adaptability is where we see its strength. In an age of austerity witnessing the retreat of social welfare institutions and the transfer of responsibility for welfare from the social to the individual, the time and space is now critical for a re-articulation and underlining of what makes this practice so vital (Seymour, 2014; Hill et al, 2015). From this perspective the (re-)emergence of streetwork can be understood as a response to the crisis within welfare services. In a complex world where the contradictions of capitalism are laid on the shoulders of individual citizens, a practice is required that transcends traditional welfare institutions and understands the severity and the implications of these social and economic contradictions. Key to our discussion is a view of streetwork as a

radical practice that has at its core an ethic and knowledge of its history as an informal educational practice that will meet the needs of the populations it works with, rather than a deficit lens of a rescuing mission for ‘lost souls’.

The social streetworker, informed by a social justice approach, has an explicit commitment to build into outcomes a desire for transformative systemic change; as such, the social streetworker recognises themselves as an agent of change and promotes their work as a challenge to inequality and a response to injustice. Those who live street-connected lives are all too frequently hidden from traditional vantage points, which renders them more vulnerable. Social justice is therefore centrally embedded into our methodology and practice because of a commitment to amplify the agency of people on the margins of society. Working together with the service user activates the social citizenship of these disenfranchised groups. A streetwork approach is to work with groups in terms of advocacy and empowerment in order to co-produce strategies and interventions that work. Equally, the approach is informed by a commitment to promote agency in addition to having an understanding of the ways in which structural barriers lead to inequality, which must therefore be addressed as an inherent part of the problem.

## What is street social work: introducing streetwork

Streetwork can variously be considered as a context, discipline, ethical standpoint and intervention within the disciplinary fields of youth work, community work, social work and health services. It is a historic approach that is finding new life within the contemporary political and economic environment (Garland, 1985; Ferguson, 2004). As a relatively new intervention, yet one that has deep roots in historical traditions, we are defining streetwork here as an emergent field of practice. The article proposes that the term ‘streetwork’ is both provocative and simultaneously an invitation for further discussion; moreover, this discussion is actually framed in a much wider analysis of current service provision. These considerations notwithstanding, in order to develop a professional narrative that best captures a streetwork approach, and to begin an effective dialogue, we are defining streetwork as a ‘helping profession’-related activity in a very broad, pragmatic sense. This reference to helping professionals is deliberately broad as it seeks to encompass all forms of youth, community and social support work. Adopting this position promotes ideas of streetwork as more than simply a technical activity. As a ‘helping profession’ activity, streetwork belongs to a wider professional discourse as an approach and intervention that aims to build emancipatory practice with displaced and socially marginalised populations. Dynamo International (2008), the international streetwork platform, defines streetwork as an activity that:

Can give [back] to people in difficulties the power to act in their own lives and move towards improved wellbeing, using the values of justice, equality, human dignity and solidarity. Through their proximity or their integration into the living areas of these vulnerable people, the street worker remains the first link in the chain of support and state aid.

In using these ideas to describe the role of the streetworker, Dynamo International helps us to see that we need a much broader definition of its work: it is an intervention that transcends the traditional boundaries of professional practice. Furthermore, the

approach draws from a much broader academic interdisciplinary framework, for example, urban geography, social science, nursing, housing and psychology, all of which have something useful to contribute to the growing discourse of streetwork. The street has historically been the locus of professional and institutional-related development for social work-oriented helping professions, all of which have played a significant role in the development of social work, and other related welfare services. Historically (and still, to a certain extent, today), this work was done by Christian philanthropists informed by ideas of street rescue (Williams, 1993; Payne, 2005). Those who engaged in early street outreach were people disturbed by the damage wrought by 19th-century industrialisation and urbanisation in the UK and Western Europe. This dual process of industrialisation and urbanisation, underpinned by liberal capitalism, gave rise to unequal social and economic conditions and contradictions, all of which required formal and informal structural intervention (Hobsbawm, 2004). The street thus became the very first point of contact, offering welfare and a means of addressing these contradictions of capitalism and social and economic inequality (Ferguson, 2011; Hill et al, 2015). Beyond the 19th century, streetwork has continued to develop as both a methodology and practice, remaining a central point of contact for vulnerable service-user groups. The mid-20th century saw the development of a comprehensive welfare state in the UK. The development of large, centrally planned, post-war institutions that provided education, health, criminal justice and welfare services helped shape a new form of streetwork (Hill et al, 2018). This new form of streetwork served those individuals that often fell between the services of the large-scale institutions. From this period, we see the emergence of targeted streetwork provision in the form of detached youth work and outreach work within mental health, criminal justice and social services (Fletcher and Bonell, 2009; Hill et al, 2015). The idea of peripatetic youth work, sometimes described as detached work, was enshrined in the Albemarle report of the 1960s, which recognised that, for one reason or another, not everyone could access the ‘space and place’, and that youth workers should extend the repertoires of their activities to incorporate those left outside. This report acknowledges that a low-threshold practice to engage young people on their terms was fundamental to offering an inclusive practice:

We have in mind the coffee bar sited strategically at the sort of place where they tend to congregate, the ‘drop in’ club – the experimental youth centre or workshop – We would go even further and suggest there is also a need for experiment with peripatetic youth workers, not attached directly to any organisation or premises, who would work with existing groups or gangs of young people. Only by going out to young people shall we discover how to gain their confidence, to meet their needs and to make them aware of more genuinely rewarding pursuits. (HMSO, 1960: paragraph 187)

The move away from centrally planned state services through the process of deinstitutionalisation during the late 20th century gave rise to a new age of community-based care. This transfer of vulnerable populations from the traditional institutional warehouses of the asylum, special school and hospital placed a visible minority of highly vulnerable people in a community context (Hill et al, 2018). While initially claimed as a progressive move, community care has been opportunistically used by governments to fragment public services and transfer services to charities, non-

governmental organisations and the private sector through a process of competitive tendering. The move to community-based service provision has increased the need for a streetwork approach to engage and work with those individuals who are hard to reach, and both detached youth work and assertive outreach services (often located within mental health, housing and addiction services) have flourished within this context. While we recognise that contemporary streetwork can be viewed as having firm roots within the historical traditions of street rescue, detached youth work and outreach provision, we must also acknowledge that streetwork as an emergent field of practice needs to move beyond targeted and conditional service provision. Indeed, the idea of streetwork that we are promoting is a practice informed by the radical educational philosophers of Freire (1970), Dewey (1998 [1938]) and Oakeshott (1972), who counsel pedagogues to listen and learn from their students, rather than impose solutions from above. Of course, this kind of radical practice takes time and is thus at odds with short-term, outcomes-focused targeted work. There are real contemporary challenges for detached and outreach workers, particularly when the social agenda is so focused on ‘prevention’:

The concept of prevention is used in very different fields of activity, and therefore can be interpreted in many ways, often resulting in confusion. For example, police prevention of criminal behaviour has nothing to do with socio-educational prevention work on the streets. Too often used as a floating message, the term ‘prevention’ is adapted to all kind of contexts. It is unsurprising to find real confusion, and a difficulty in grasping a proper understanding of the work of streetworkers. (Dynamo International, 2008)

Those engaged in streetwork will recognise the ‘floating messages’ and fluidity of their profession, and thus the challenge is to withstand the pressures from other agencies, like the police, who equally make a claim to working with street-based populations, when the fundamental philosophical and ethical underpinning of such practice is absent.

After decades of neoliberal globalisation and increasing austerity, welfare is more conditional than ever and the consequences for the most vulnerable populations are more acute, particularly for those who cannot navigate the increasingly conditional social relationships. All too frequently, vulnerable individuals with multiple and complex needs have difficulties conforming, performing and adapting, and therefore frequently find themselves at the street level with little support; this is where the streetworker comes into their own. Evidently, the difference between street-based services and more traditional centre-based ones is that the interventions happen at the street level. A streetworker describes the difference as follows:

“I don’t mind if they don’t come to their appointment, or anything, as long as they know I am there. I’ll come back every day regardless of someone saying ‘F off’ or not turning up. There are no rules about how we support our clients. We are just there.” (Outreach worker, Simon on the Streets)

Streetwork, then, is a relational practice dependant on building good relationships with service users, where trust develops through an understanding of ‘where the other person is at’; in this sense, it is a slow burn rather than a ‘quick fix’, a process of simply

being there and ‘walking with’. Streetwork thus reveals some of the contradictions right at the heart of current social welfare provision, the kind of contradiction that troubled Lipsky in terms of being able to successfully mediate between necessary outcomes while still delivering packages of support:

To deliver street-level policy through bureaucracy is to embrace contradiction. On the one hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring and responsibility. On the other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resource limitations and constraints, making care and responsibility conditional. (2010: 71)

This point is further underlined by Dynamo International (2008) in their description of the streetworker as ‘the first and last point of contact’ for those unable, for whatever reason, to engage in traditional office-based settings. At its very heart, streetwork is a process that places emphasis on meeting people on their own terms and journeying with them, both physically in a geographical sense and, perhaps even more importantly, socially and psychologically. A streetwork approach offers greater flexibility in its approach to working with the vulnerable and needy, for example, one of the streetworkers interviewed described this process as follows:

“Well, what we aim to do is emotional and practical support. Our focus is completely on emotions and empathy.... So, I don’t mind if our client’s aren’t able to make the changes that we as a society would want them to make. So, if they stay the same, at least they have had a person to support them and listen to them and be there with them.” (Outreach worker, Simon on the Streets)

Streetwork can be articulated as the practice of working alongside the person and seeing them, first and foremost, as a human and not a service or organisational outcome. It offers recognition that people are more than a process or result within a pressurised and demanding service provision context. It is through this understanding of working beyond traditional disciplinary and structural boundaries that the ethical underpinning becomes clear.

## **Streetwork: a professional discipline and activity**

Streetwork has evolved from contemporary service provision in the disciplinary fields of youth, community, social and health-care practice, in part, as a response to the significant economic and social change within late-modern society. Traditionally, service provision is provided in a health clinic, a social service office or community centre, and within a fixed geographical area. The service user travels to the service, or the professional will visit the service user at a place of their choice. Streetwork has developed as a response to the needs of those individuals who often fall between the gaps of more traditional service provision, for example, those who find it difficult to regulate themselves or be regulated, often living at the margins of society and only visible at the street level, such as the homeless, refugees, sex workers, substance users, young people and people experiencing extreme mental distress and undiagnosed

trauma. In the context of diminishing resources and a foregrounding of outcomes and impact as measures of how and where to direct those resources, work with socially and economically marginalised groups is easy to cut, which means that vulnerable individuals with multiple and complex needs fall through welfare safety nets. As an approach and methodology, streetwork requires an open-ended and fluid intervention, free from the usual strictures of recording clear outcomes. This position is best summarised by a streetworker who describes her everyday work:

“A lot of my approach is just going ‘hi’ and I’ll carry on walking. I won’t ask someone how they are necessarily if they don’t seem up to that conversation. And with other clients, if one looks up and says ‘hi’, I will go sit down with them. Then you go from there. It’s not up to me. I can’t push a relationship on someone. People move at their own pace to build a relationship. It’s quite daunting building relationships.” (Outreach worker, Simon on the Streets)

As an eclectic discipline informed by a multidimensional approach, streetwork is nevertheless not devoid of rigour or structure in its methodology. This diverse and eclectic approach is positive; eclecticism is premised on a critical acceptance of diversity in practice and acknowledgement that no one theory can answer the complexity of meeting the needs of social streetwork service users/subjects (Yu-Te and Lin, 2016). The approach that we are drawing on has some resonance and commonalities with the work of Lehman and Cody (2001), and is informed by the following concepts:

- a focus upon relationship-based interactions that place the subject/service user as the centre of change;
- a commitment to flexibility in the utilisation of problem-solving approaches in providing direct and indirect advocacy and support with the subject/service user;
- assessment and communication methodologies that focus on addressing issues such as diversity, oppression and discrimination; and
- the deployment and selection of evidence-based methodologies from broad professional disciplines that service the subject/service user best.

As a professional discipline, streetwork must be open access and based on developing a working relationship. Above all, a successful streetwork approach is about proximity to street-based populations, and thus having a good understanding of the precarity of a life predominantly lived on the streets. A good example of this is knowing, for example, that a sex worker who has been up all night will never, despite the best will in the world, make an appointment set for the morning. Streetworkers thus become the first and last port of call for people experiencing some form of social, mental or health-related crisis at the street level, usually because all statutory options have failed. Streetwork starts from the premise that you begin the work where you find the service user and in response to their needs. One streetworker reports that:

“One of my clients, it’s taking me a year to engage. We have a really good working relationship now because I have never pushed him. It was up to him. He knew I was going to walk past him every day. He knew I’d ask him if he wanted a fag. But that was it. I think, a lot of the time, people



can be overbearing, asking ‘What’s going on?’, ‘What’s wrong with you?’.”  
(Outreach worker, Simon on the Streets)

Fundamental to this approach is the idea of working where people are and where they feel comfortable engaging. Streetwork is the wilful act of accompaniment, of positioning yourself alongside someone who is beginning to undertake a complex social journey. The idea of offering support is the belief that it is this dialogical approach that, at its core, will develop self-esteem, work on personal and social skills, and enable participation and inclusion in social life on terms defined by the service users.

Social streetwork can also be explored as a professional activity that has congruence with the ideas of Foucault (2006) in his exploration of the techniques of self and the art of self-care. The classical ideas of the Greek, Roman and Hellenic position of *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) are integral to the social streetwork relationship. Foucault highlights that care of the self can be located as follows:

- (1) It is a general attitude, a way to consider things, to be in the world, to perform actions, to relate with other subjects. The *epimeleia heautou* is an attitude: regarding the self, regarding others, regarding the world.
- (2) It is a way to pay attention, to look. To preoccupy for the self, to take our gaze outside. It is about paying attention to what we think and what happens to the thought. In this fashion, it is bound with the word *melete* that means both exercise, and care and preoccupation.
- (3) The *epimeleia heautou* does not appoint the attention or global or general interest over oneself. But instead, it deals particularly with the techniques or actions through which the subject takes care of itself, of how it purifies, modifies, and transfigures itself, in other words, how the subject is being formed. (Foucault, 2006: 28)

Reflecting on the previous quote, social streetwork can be considered to be a practice and technique of care of the self through the process of relating to, and supporting, others within a helping relationship – at the street level. This process of care is a deliberate act of accompaniment with the individual that seeks to support those who often do not have access to, or are excluded from, broader welfare/care services, hence the need to support acts of self-care and self-direction in the helping relationship.

## Objectives and methodologies of streetwork

### *Going beyond traditional service boundaries: low-threshold interventions*

Contemporary social streetwork practice works at the margins of traditional statutory service provision with socially marginalised and excluded communities. A key feature of streetwork involves working with complex trauma and neglect. One streetworker describes her typical service user as having “suffered trauma as a child. On average, it’s sexual abuse. They’ve either been in care or stayed in really abusive households.... The people who were there, who were meant to protect our clients didn’t” (outreach worker, Simon on the Streets).

Streetworkers work with those who do not fit within outcome-focused service delivery provision. Often, individuals or groups who respond best to a streetworker



approach are those who cannot adapt to the rigidity of statutory welfare requirements, outcomes or conditions. Outcomes are central to modern social welfare, education and health services, and promoting social change in a top-down mechanistic format is paramount in these contexts (Hill, 2016). The streetworker, by contrast, works with individuals who fall through the gaps of service provision: the refugee who has no access to public funds or support; the mental health service user who has a drug dependency; the homeless person with complex mental health problems; the sex worker who has been traumatised through unpunished rape; the list is endless. The main point is that streetwork identifies with those who are hard to engage, hard to reach and, because of the complexity of their needs, forgotten. One streetworker pithily summarised their ethical and methodological outlook as “We don’t condemn or condone” (Outreach Worker, Simon on the Streets). The core methodology to deliver this objective is a commitment to low-threshold practices. Low-threshold or harm-minimisation approaches are models developed when working with socially isolated and excluded communities (Goldberg et al, 2001; Hill et al, 2015). Harm reduction does not condone, but promotes the means to keep safe in otherwise dangerous activities, for example providing needle exchanges for drug users and condoms and rape alarms for sex workers.

Although, thus far, we have promoted streetwork as an outreach service, actively going to meet people in their own domains, we nevertheless also recognise that a streetwork approach may also be applied in a more traditional, outcome-focused service. In this latter case, the context may shift and the low-threshold intervention rests with the worker utilising the method as a means of facilitating communication and as an engagement strategy to improve and promote better outcomes for the service user and their organisation; sometimes, this is done simply by being flexible with how a service is delivered, adapting times and even spaces to fit demand. Regardless of the organisation and the practice, and despite the different points of contact and outcomes, we are working towards developing relationships in order to promote better social and material outcomes for those we work with.

### *Social support and accompaniment*

As a methodology, streetwork practice is underpinned by a non-judgemental approach, not simply in terms of professional evaluation, but also in terms of professional engagement. Simply put, this means that a worker cannot enter a relationship with a predetermined outcome, which is difficult as many traditional services are delivered on the premise of enforced change in behaviour or social context. Streetwork aims to work alongside the individual or in their communities, listening to the service user and providing informal social support in order to promote social change. Using a dialogical approach, solutions are co-created rather than imposed. The practice works with people using a holistic model and is informed by a rich history of social pedagogy and informal education and social justice (Storo, 2013). Working alongside service users, the approach promotes social learning with the aim of empowering, educating and enabling the service user to operate better within the social welfare, health and education frameworks. As a methodology, streetwork promotes social inclusion, but only at the pace of the service user and then only on their terms. Building on the premise of low-threshold support, a central aim of streetwork is to

develop a helping relationship based on mutual social learning and education. Central to this approach are the following principles:

- a grounded education of the *head* that promotes cognitive learning and problem solving;
- an awareness of a person's emotional and spiritual development, locating their *heart* and allowing them space and time to develop as a whole person; and
- direct support and guidance to build practical skills of the *hand*, from independent living and self-care techniques, to managing daily activities (Cameron and Boddy, 2005).

While these concepts and approaches are neither new nor revolutionary, they require a reflective and pragmatic approach centred on the individual. This whole-systems approach of accompaniment rather than direction lies at the heart of social streetwork practice. This is where the truly radical community work perspective is located. In a professional context of fast-paced assessments, interventions and outcomes within the helping professions, streetwork repositions the helping relationship, slowing down our activity as we travel with and work alongside service users. This slowing down of practice and repositioning ourselves within a streetwork context allows for a radical community work perspective to be explored.

### *Inclusion and social democracy*

As we have explored previously, the streetworker starts from where the service user is at; that may be a physical location such as the street but it is also a mental and potentially emotional place. Developing engagement is a horizontal, not hierarchical, process, a bottom-up approach that involves listening to the experience of street-based individuals and communities, and allowing them to formulate their own responses to their own social and material conditions (Goodman et al, 2014). This may seem a natural response to working in a humanistic manner with others and often does form part of the professional and ethical make-up of all professions as an aspirational ethical and value-based system. Yet, there are frequent problems with many of the statutory professions delivering from traditional welfare institutions, and their practitioners often become compromised when delivering social policy at a street level (Lipsky, 2010). A streetwork approach supports practitioners to address the inherent contradictions within traditional social support and direct practice, and streetworkers have a commitment to eliminating the inherent power relationship within social and welfare service provision. Participation and the co-creation of services that are fit for purpose are longer-term goals of the practice.

All too often, clients face social complexity, with little or no personal agency over their circumstances. In most interactions with public institutions, they are locked into a voluntary or coercive relationship. Even in a voluntary situation, the lines become problematic (Lipsky, 2010). Building on its low-threshold approach and ideas of social accompaniment, streetwork seeks to address the power relationships between the service user and institutions, acknowledge them, and promote practices that address this structural imbalance. This participatory approach and standpoint is key to addressing inequality and has been used within health and community services with some success (Marston et al, 2016). Integral to the social streetwork approach

is the development of self-advocacy and citizen advocacy (MacLean and Harrison, 2009). While streetwork can deploy a social casework approach in its direct form of social support, it is important to acknowledge that social support offers a limited one-dimensional approach to problem solving. In managing social complexity and exclusion, we recognise that individuals can and should act as self-advocates and work with larger social movements and collectives (Vosburgh and Hyman, 1973). A streetwork approach is underpinned by an understanding of the growing structural inequalities inherent in contemporary neoliberal globalisation. Another important dimension of the streetwork approach is to challenge the pathology of the individualisation and somatisation of complex social problems (Mills, 1943). While working pragmatically with individual cases, streetwork promotes collectivity at the centre of its approach by decentring the dominant discourses of self-care, individualism and the culture of the self, and reasserting the primacy of self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy is a primary method and outcome for social streetwork as it is a powerful intervention and experience. When identifying structural issues that impact upon street-based populations, it is important that we form groups, make links and begin to express the commonalities that locate us at the street level. Self-advocacy groups are the start of a journey, and require support and coordination in terms of developing a group-work approach in their initial stages. Confidence skills, assertiveness training and educational support and resources are the types of competencies facilitated by the streetworker. Self-advocacy has a powerful history and past record of achievement in supporting marginalised service users to make their voices heard and their issues visible within a political and institutional area (Maclean and Harrison, 2009; Friedman et al, 2014). A longer-term aim of a streetwork approach is to identify successful strategies of inclusion and to promote social democracy as a key to the process of citizen advocacy. The streetworker becomes the interlocutor for those unable to do so for themselves and, as such, promotes an awareness of these issues to external institutions. The promotion of citizen advocacy by streetworkers, rather than by streetbased populations themselves, should only be done in circumstances where the street-based population is too vulnerable, chaotic or marginalised, or lacking in self-confidence, poor communication skills or language capacity.

## **The contemporary challenges facing streetwork as a methodology for radical community social work practice**

There are several very serious challenges facing streetwork that need to be addressed if we are serious about developing streetwork as an approach for contemporary radical community and social work practice. The social, economic, political and cultural contexts that frame our work not only present us with complex challenges, but also require a commitment to, and understanding of, an ethical practice that emphasises certain values and concerns: the worth placed on the person; the importance of critical thinking; and the need to examine the 'taken for granted'. Streetworkers do not operate from neutral positions, but understand the prevailing political and economic contexts that frame our work, and pick a side.

Our lived experience is marshalled by individualism, underpinned by competition, systematic economic inequality and social exclusion. Streetworkers walk with and accompany the marginalised and socially excluded wherever they may be; the city

centre substance user; the street-based sex worker; the sofa-surfing care leaver; the migrant lost in the city; and the older adult isolated and alone, walking the city during the day.

An insidious feature of contemporary neoliberal political and economic discourse is its ability to hijack and subvert emancipatory practices and social movements, and repackage them within a framework that supports the dominant political and economic system. Radical social change is reformed and becomes an opportunity to reinforce the dominant political and economic model of neoliberalism. The process of deinstitutionalisation and community care has paved the way for a transfer of public assets and services to private for-profit businesses. Service-user autonomy and rights-based social movements have become a mechanism for introducing market-based 'personalisation' reforms that transfer responsibility for care from the state to the individual. Markets now determine all of our actions and dictate our working patterns. In the context of austerity-driven cost-cutting and multi-agency approaches, framed in narratives of early intervention and/or prevention strategies, there is a need for streetworkers to be clear about who their primary client is, and what makes this relationship different to other practices. In practice, this means being transparent, developing a low-threshold approach, being accepting and working with individuals and groups in ways that are beneficial to them, such as using flexible time frames that work for the respective group.

There is always the potential for streetwork to be used as a formula for reducing and removing much-needed traditional service provision given austerity measures and the reduction in public services, typically in the areas where streetwork finds itself, for example, youth, mental health, homelessness and street sex work, essentially the vulnerable and hard-to-reach areas. Streetwork is not a substitute for good universal health, education, welfare, criminal justice or social service provision. Streetwork provides a different, if complementary, service, functioning as a catalyst and key point of contact for those that fall between traditional service provisions. Streetwork is not, and nor should it ever become, a replacement for services or service provision; it is not a methodology for devolving the cost of service provision from the state or agency to the individual. Streetwork is a complementary practice to formal welfare, and is most successful when it sits alongside other service providers in education, criminal justice and health and social services. The challenge for streetworkers, then, is to acknowledge that streetwork is itself a 'floating concept', and is easily manipulated when a strong account of what streetwork is, and the ethical principles that underpin it, are absent. In this scenario, there is the potential for it to become a form of social control or soft policing. By placing ourselves alongside vulnerable populations, we present a unique opportunity for the surveillance and observation of marginalised social groups. There is a valid argument that all social work provision has a tendency towards social control, and that may be true within its statutory contexts; social work often works in a conflictual helping relationship, often within child protection decision-making processes, or providing economic rationalisations and resource management within adult social care.

With these challenges in mind, it is important that we develop, enhance and promote streetwork education and practice accordingly. In countering the manipulation of streetwork, we must start from where the practitioner is at. First, as a methodology for radical community-based social work activity, streetwork can be practised from within traditional statutory social work institutions, as well as more informal

community-based voluntary organisations. To practise streetwork is to move beyond the limited silo-based thinking of organisations and outcomes; we are more than the roles defined by social policy and safeguarding agendas. As a methodology and practice, streetwork is a process for social work and community-based practitioners to re-imagine their space of encounter with service users and to meet them on their own terms in order to develop a more equitable and supportive helping relationship. To develop the streetwork approach requires both a shift in thinking and, equally, a shift in professional organisation. Social workers and community-based practitioners need to find organisations that allow them to meet up and discuss streetwork as a practice, and there are many platforms locally, regionally and internationally. The Social Work Action Network, the Federation of Detached Youth Workers and Dynamo International are all useful networks that offer space to reflect on practice, and meet other like-minded practitioners seeking to challenge the dominant modes of practice. Through cooperation, reflection, discussion, seeking out allies and building networks, we can begin to re-imagine community-based social work practice. We need to work with our professional associations and allied trade unions to make effective challenges to the dominant models of economic and political governance; in turn, these organisations can begin to lobby for systemic change. The streetworker understands that advocacy, or being a mouthpiece, is an intrinsic part of their role. Streetworkers publicly address and claim the needs, problems and interests of the people they work with. This may be through the vehicle of political or local activism, or working collaboratively with service users to effect social and political change.

Poverty and inequality are not choices made by individuals; they are a direct expression of political and economic policy. We have a choice about how we would like society to look and parliamentary democracy offers us a vehicle for creating a better or 'good' society. The key message for challenging the dominant models of political and economic governance is that we have the ability to connect our practice with service users, professional platforms, trade unions and political parties. We live within a system that seeks to isolate and individualise our thinking and practice; to be truly radical, we need to connect, starting at the street level, and create communities of resistance to the dominant political, social and economic narrative.

## **Tentative conclusions**

This article has suggested that we think about streetwork as a useful approach to working with marginalised and excluded communities. We have argued that a streetwork approach is essential for developing a more humanistic, relational approach to working with people. Streetwork is informed by the ideals and principles of social justice, inclusion and empowerment, and offers an approach to address structural inequalities by understanding the nature of power. Streetwork actively seeks to co-create solutions by valuing the lived experiences of some of the most marginal populations. In promoting and enhancing social justice, streetwork is good social work practice that draws on empowering values and skills. Hence, streetwork lies at the heart of good practice and offers something to all of us.

## **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## References

- Dewey, J, 1998 [1938], *Experience and education*, Indianapolis: Kappa Delta Pi
- Dynamo International, 2008, International guide on the methodology of street work, [www.travailderue.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/international\\_guide.pdf](http://www.travailderue.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/international_guide.pdf)
- Ferguson, H, 2004, *Protecting children in time: Child abuse, child protection and the promotion of welfare*, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan
- Ferguson, H, 2011, *Child protection practice*, Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Fletcher, A, Bonell, C, 2009, Detaching youth work to reduce drug and alcohol related harm, *Public Policy Research*, 15, 4, 217–23
- Foucault, M, 1978, *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (vol I), New York, NY: Random House
- Foucault, M, 1985, *The use of pleasure: The history of sexuality* (vol II), New York, NY: Random House
- Foucault, M, 1986, *The care of the self: The history of sexuality* (vol III), New York, NY: Random House
- Foucault, M, 2006, *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981–1982*, New York, NY: Picador
- Friedman, C, Arnold, C, Owen, A, Sandman, L, 2014, ‘Remember our voices are our tools’: sexual self-advocacy as defined by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, *Sexuality & Disability*, 32, 4, 515–32
- Garland, D, 1985, *Punishment and welfare: A history of penal strategies*, Aldershot: Gower
- Goldberg, D, Burns, S, Taylor, A, Cameron, S, Hargreaves, D, Hutchinson, S, 2001, Trends in HCV prevalence among injecting drug users in Glasgow and Edinburgh during the era of needle/syringe exchange, *Scandinavian Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 33, 6, 457–61
- Goodman, RA, Bunnell, R, Posner, SF, 2014, What is ‘community health’? Examining the meaning of an evolving field in public health, *Prev Med*, October, 67
- Hadot, P, 1995, *Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (ed AI Davidson and trans M Chase), Oxford: Blackwell
- Hadot, P, 2004, *What is ancient philosophy?*, Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard
- Hill, D, 2016, From policy to practice: how do community workers interpret and work with the contemporary UK Drug Strategy?, PhD thesis, Leeds Beckett University, UK
- Hill, D, Penson, WJ, Charura, D, 2015, *Working with dual diagnosis: A psycho social perspective*, London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Hill, D, Agu, L, Mercer, D, 2018, *Exploring and locating social work: A foundation for practice*, London: Macmillan International – Red Globe Press
- HMSO (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office), 1960 *The youth service in England and Wales (the Albermarle Report)*, Cmnd. 929, London: HMSO
- Hobsbawn, E, 2004, *The Age of Empire*, London: Abacus
- Jordan, B, Drakeford, M, 2012, *Social work and social policy under austerity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Lehman, P, Cody, N, 2001, *Theoretical perspectives for direct social work practice: A generalist eclectic approach*, New York, NY: Springer
- Lipsky, M, 2010, *Street level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*, New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation
- Maclean, S & Harrison, R, 2009, *Theory & Practice: A Straightforward guide for Social Work Students*, Rugby –Staffordshire: Kirwan Maclean Associates

- Marston, C, Hinton, R, Kean, S, Baral, S, Ahuja, A, Costello, A, Portela, A, 2016, Community participation for transformative action on women's, children's and adolescents' health, *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 94, 5, 376–82
- Mills, CW, 1943, The professional ideology of social pathologists, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 49, 2, 165–80
- Payne, M, 2005, *The Origins of Social Work: Continuity and Change*, London: Macmillan Higher Education
- Storo, J, 2013, *Practical social pedagogy*, Bristol: The Policy Press (electronic resource, 'Theories, Values and Tools for Working with Children and Young People', 2013, Leeds Beckett University Library Catalogue)
- Vosburgh, W, Hyman, D, 1973, Advocacy and bureaucracy: the life and times of a decentralized citizen's advocacy program, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 18, 4, 433–48
- Williams, C, 1993, Who are 'street children'? a hierarchy of street use and appropriate responses, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 17, 6, 831–41
- Yu-Te, H, Lin, F, 2016, Understanding depression from different paradigms: toward an eclectic social work approach, *British Journal of Social Work*, 46, 3, 756–72



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.