



## Series 1 Episode 7

### Summary and Key Messages

[00:00:00] **Lesley:** Hello and welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host and my name is Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:13] **Sarah:** And I'm your other host and I'm Dr Sarah Lonbay. So we hope you enjoy today's episode.

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### Introduction to Episode 7

[00:00:20] **Sarah:** Hi everyone, I'm back in the studio today with Lesley, this is Sarah, and we are today recording the final episode of the Portal Podcast.

[00:00:37] **Lesley:** Hi.

[00:00:38] **Sarah:** Hi. So hopefully you've had a listen to the other episodes, hopefully you've enjoyed some of the conversations that we've had, or all of the conversations that we've had. Lesley and I wanted to come back today and just do a wrapping up and summary of some of the really interesting chats that we've had with some really great researchers. And also, just to draw out maybe some of the points that we thought were particularly important for practice and some questions that it's raised for us that we wanted to share with you. So we're going to chat through and do a bit of a recap of some of the episodes now.

So the first one way back, almost a year ago we recorded it, was our conversation with Mr Neil Evans, and hopefully Lesley can remember what we talked about all that time ago.

[00:01:26] **Lesley:** Yeah, so Neil was a career guidance practitioner and that was his background. So he'd done some investigation into aspirations and

working with young people. And I remember some of the challenges that we were talking about in terms of things like professional responsibility and about how we work across agencies and the different responsibilities that practitioners had. I do remember Neil talking about at certain points he was the only person that a young person was talking to at the time. And he wasn't then going to start thinking, "well, I'm just the career guidance practitioner therefore I can only talk about these things". And about how when you are working with young people, in whatever role you're in, it isn't as simple as saying, "well I'm only going to talk to you about this because this is my job". But about that almost moral obligation towards a person who's in need with you. And that's some of the things that it was making me think about, around the kind of silos that we have in different multi-agencies. You know, each agency saying, "I'm going to work in this way and that's my job", and then another agency worker saying, "no, well, this is mine". And actually what we more need is that holistic approach where people are actually thinking about the bigger issues for that young person. And I'm concerned that we're really, increasingly, not doing that. Like as if we haven't sorted that issue out yet. So that's why, for me, young people always fall through the gaps.

[00:03:01] **Sarah:** Yeah, and I think not just young people, I think what you're saying really resonates with me in terms of the adult safeguarding work that I do in terms of research and how there might be lots of agencies involved with a single person and how is that connecting up. So something to come back to.

[00:03:19] **Lesley:** Absolutely, yes. So that was Neil.

[00:03:22] **Sarah:** So that was Neil, yeah. A great conversation, which started off the series. And our next conversation was with Rick, and we spoke to Rick about his paper on whiteness Britishness and the racist reality of Brexit. In fact Neil and Rick have both retired since we recorded those.

[00:03:39] **Lesley:** I think actually they'd retired before and they were the first ones we could get in because they had a free schedule, which was quite an important thing actually, which we can come back to, about time and things like that. Time to think and time to do things. But I remember some of the things with Rick that have resonated with me was about the fact that we still don't really teach these elements of whiteness, that there's a lack of understanding of that, that then means that when, as practitioners you can be operating in a way that it is to some extent, I used the expression with a friend the other day, casual racism, because of the way we talk about certain things

and don't register that actually that's actually quite a racist thing. And I think, I remember I talked to Rick about examples of practitioners making decisions based on skin colour alone, and things like that. And it's more just about – people get very defensive I think, don't they, about what could be seen as a contentious topic?

[00:04:51] **Sarah:** Yeah, definitely, I think that definitely came up in the conversation. And that point that you just made about how we're teaching, I remember having the discussion about education and actually that it's not just about schools and universities being educators, but actually practitioners as social educators and their role to challenge things and to be really reflective about their practice in that sense as well. So in that way all of us are educators because all of us have a role in educating ourselves and trying to make a difference to other people in the way that we approach our work.

[00:05:23] **Lesley:** Yeah, which is challenging when people are so busy, isn't it? And they're just thinking, well, this is my job, connecting back to what we were just saying there that Neil raised, that this is my job and this is what I do, and there's a process to be followed rather than actually we need to think outside of that, and think differently about things, because otherwise we're just repeating and reinforcing some of the discrimination and the barriers that people are facing every day.

[00:05:51] **Sarah:** Yeah, because that issue, we did talk a lot with Neil as well, I remember, about practitioner bias and reflection and some of those challenges about when and how you can do that. And actually Neil had some interesting ideas about how you might manage that if you remember, because he said sometimes you've got to push back against what your organization wants you to do, which isn't always easy in itself, and there's always a judgement to be made about when and how that's possible.

[00:06:16] **Lesley:** To me it's about the fact that we need to – I heard a really interesting thing when I was watching Star Trek the other day, just to make a lovely Star Trek reference, and it was about the difference between "questioning" and "a question". And I found that really resonated with me, that there seems to be a defensiveness about people as though they are being "questioned" rather than actually us just asking the question of, "so why are you doing that? Why do it that way?"

[00:06:49] **Sarah:** Oh, I love that point.

[00:06:50] **Lesley:** Do you like it? I really liked that, that made complete sense to me, because I thought, why are people getting so defensive when all you're doing is asking a question? And a question is about curiosity, it's about trying to understand, it doesn't mean that individual is being "questioned" in terms of their values or who they are.

[00:07:09] **Sarah:** Yeah, it's about a conversation isn't it? Actually I'm reading a book at the moment called *Conflict is Not Abuse* by someone called Sarah Schulman.

[00:07:17] **Lesley:** That sounds so much more intellectual than my Star Trek reference!

[00:07:21] **Sarah:** No, Star Trek has made a really good point, I love it. I need to start watching it maybe.

[00:07:26] **Lesley:** It's the new one, it's Star Trek Discovery.

[00:07:28] **Sarah:** Oh, okay. I never really got into it, but maybe I should give it a shot. But she picks up on a similar point around defensiveness. So what she talks about is that difference between conflict and abuse and how maybe people, if they are questioned about their motives or what they're doing, can react defensively and that can create really difficult situations. Whereas in actual fact it's about having a conversation to uncover what's really happening and what different people's roles are in that situation that's emerging. And I think there is sometimes a reluctance, for lots of different reasons, to actually engage in those kinds of conversations and those questions.

[00:08:03] **Lesley:** I think so, yeah, because I feel like that's become an increasing, just anecdotally, not that I've researched this, but I've just felt increasingly I've noticed people acting very defensively when you ask a question. And I need to ask questions, to try and understand what's going on. So I sometimes get quite a shock when somebody's response is so defensive, and I was like, "oh gosh, what happened there?" but I think through these conversations we've had were actually really positive, because it felt like we had stepped outside of our day-to-day work in order to start asking some questions and discussing them with people who have different knowledge to us. And I found that quite liberating and interesting.

[00:08:57] **Sarah:** It's been a really, really lovely process, hasn't it?

[00:08:59] **Lesley:** It has definitely, yeah.

[00:09:01] **Sarah:** So, shall we move on to episode three, which was a conversation with Donna about her work, which was co-authored with Dr Faye Cosgrove? We talked to Donna about Appropriate Adults in police custody suites, which was again a really interesting conversation and actually really touched on some stuff that I'm particularly interested in around the concept of vulnerability and how we construct the vulnerable adult and what that means for people. So really fascinating, and again I think some of the same things, although ostensibly these were all very different topics and different contexts for the papers, those same points came up about that need to pause, to stop, to think about what you're doing. I remember Donna saying that she'd had that moment in practice where she'd gone in as an appropriate adult and had this moment where she thought, well, what's going on with the language here? If I'm "appropriate" is that saying to this other person that they're not? What does that mean for them?

[00:09:59] **Lesley:** I was interested, I think for me it came out, about what do you do where there's needs there, and there's some challenges and there's difficulties that people are facing, and the services are not set up there because obviously this is a volunteer scheme, isn't it? And some of those roles, they used to be done by social workers, but then you've got volunteers because actually the social workers haven't got the time to do it. And what do you do in those situations? Do you just pretend that it's not happening and don't do anything? Or do you try and fill the gap and you try and help people? And for me that was interesting around that multi-agency element of, well, what do you do? Because you can have good ideals about things, but people are living life every single minute of the day, and if we don't do something at that moment in time, you've missed it, and you've not helped. And I think that when we were having those discussions, it's really important that we acknowledge what is actually happening in the system, and in the way in which things are structured, and that does connect with the language as well, doesn't it? It's all connected around then how certain people are perceived by society. And as a practitioner you need a practical hook, you need a shorthand, if you will, to be able to say "right, that means that person is entitled to this." But then you don't think necessarily through what the implications of that language are. And we don't have the answers do we? We've raised some questions.

[00:11:40] **Sarah:** We have raised some questions. But you're right and it's where it's come from as well, because I think the history of these labels and how they've developed is really interesting too, in terms of the power that they can have and what they might mean for someone. But they are used really uncritically a lot, just again for those very same reasons of it's a way of having a shared understanding of what you're talking about, it's common usage so we get used to them without thinking about them, and actually there's a lot going on underneath.

[00:12:11] **Lesley:** Didn't we decide at this point that the whole system needs to be changed.

[00:12:15] **Sarah:** I think we decided that at multiple points, yeah, we came back to that a few times. I think "burn down and start again" got mentioned.

[00:12:23] **Lesley:** We are obviously not condoning any kind of official violence in any way!

[00:12:28] **Sarah:** Or arson, just to be clear, but yeah, I think some significant change is needed.

[00:12:34] **Lesley:** There's a problem. There's a problem. Oh yeah, and then it was me wasn't it?

[00:12:37] **Sarah:** It was! Okay, well shall I let you talk about your paper?

[00:12:40] **Lesley:** Yeah, I do remember doing this paper because I remember the issue I had with, as a person who is very much a practitioner and a researcher, and trying to sort of look at the issues in a way, and I had a little battle about having to understand what neoliberalism meant and things like that. But it really did get me challenging the idea of self-help. And I think we're kind of presented with this idea, and it is important and I'm not trying to suggest it isn't, but actually self-help is being used as a way to abdicate responsibility. So the state then doesn't help and doesn't provide, and the people who are in need and have certain needs are then not getting them met. They're being told you must continue. So the parent-carers, and as I've personally continued in that role myself, the amount of pressure that's being put on, and you're then being told you've got to look after yourself. Don't come to the state, don't come and ask for help, and I've lived that. Since we recorded that I've lived that experience of trying to find support myself, as a

parent-carer, and not finding it. And it's a system that, without it being challenged and without it being questioned, is just constantly saying that's not our responsibility. We don't do that. We don't do that. And people are being left.

[00:14:12] **Sarah:** Yeah, it's putting the responsibility back onto someone, if you are not coping as an individual, it's about you and your "failings".

[00:14:19] **Lesley:** Yeah, we are just putting it constantly back on individuals and being told if you don't manage it's your fault, it's not because there is a systemic problem that is fighting against you. It is you, and that feels very Victorian to me, it's going back to the sort of morality, the idea of if you are poor, or if you're not managing, you are somehow "less", which is awful.

[00:14:48] **Sarah:** It is awful.

[00:14:49] **Lesley:** Sorry, that's a really depressing note to come to the end of that bit on!

[00:14:54] **Sarah:** Well, I don't think so. I mean, it is, but it's still important to acknowledge that and talk about it, and I think a lot of those issues that were discussed again were reflected across all of it. A lot of the conversations were a bit depressing, to be honest, weren't they, in terms of some of the issues? There were some more positive points as well, obviously, but I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done to address some of the issues.

[00:15:23] **Lesley:** Definitely. That's really well said there Sarah.

[00:15:27] **Sarah:** That didn't come out there...

[00:15:28] **Lesley:** We need to do some work to address the issues.

[00:15:30] **Sarah:** Stuff what needs doing.

[00:15:32] **Lesley:** Yeah. "Some things".

[00:15:33] **Sarah:** And yeah, who's gonna do it? That's the question. Let's not talk about politics.



[00:15:38] **Lesley:** I think that's the issue. I mean, it isn't meant to be a political, you know?

[00:15:43] **Sarah:** Oh, it inherently is though, isn't it, really?

[00:15:46] **Lesley:** I was about to say it's not a political podcast, but it is about...

[00:15:49] **Sarah:** It's about social work practice, which is political.

[00:15:50] **Lesley:** It's about social work practice and it's about questioning. Oh, I said "questioning" instead of "asking questions", we're not questioning, I said it the wrong way around there. It's about asking questions, but the problem is once you start, it's really hard to then think it's okay to carry on, isn't it?

[00:16:07] **Sarah:** But I think that what you just touched on talking about yours is what, for me, makes it very political, isn't it? Because it is that intersection between the individual and the state or the individual and the structures within which they're embedded, which are managed and created by the state a lot of times.

[00:16:27] **Lesley:** And a force that's not seen, on a day-to-day basis, when you're just doing your job or you're just doing something or you're living your life, you don't see those forces at work. And it's only when you step back from them and start to say "hang on a minute, what's going on here?" that you start to realise, oh, well, why is that happening?

[00:16:45] **Sarah:** Yeah, those structural inequalities that Rick and Neil talked about, I mean Neil talked about the positioning of younger people, Rick talked about obviously racism and whiteness, and all of those things that are operating at a level that we don't always notice or that perhaps can be screened out in practice because you're focusing on that person in front of you. But actually that person's embedded in all of these things that affect their life as well, the labels and all of it. We're getting sidetracked a bit, maybe? I don't know. Maybe we're not?

[00:17:14] **Lesley:** No, we're having a discussion, an unscripted discussion.



[00:17:19] **Sarah:** An unscripted discussion, this could go anywhere! Episode five, a conversation with Angie and Sheila about their paper, and this actually was slightly different from the others in the sense that it was talking about emotions in research, so it wasn't a topic... well, it is a topic, I don't know what I'm trying to say, but it was a slightly different conversation, but again a really important one. Because actually all of these things that we talked about, we've used the word depressing to describe some of the conversations or aspects, and that's because it is difficult to work in this kind of field and research in this kind of field. It affects us and we are dealing with other people's emotions a lot of the time as well. So it was a really useful conversation, actually, quite a nice point in the podcast series to pause and reflect on how we manage that, how we recognise that, and how we respond sensitively to our own emotions and to other people's, because I think we do have this idea that you've got to just get on with it, you've got to just be okay, and you've just got to be able to cope with whatever's thrown at you. But sometimes you need to pause and actually recognise that it's difficult.

[00:18:29] **Lesley:** I think that's the danger. I have a real issue with the phrase now "Keep Calm and Carry On". I know that's a very "British" type phrase, and I've started to have a real issue with it, and reflecting on this podcast, because I just think, well, actually let's just pause and reflect for a moment, because if you don't acknowledge the impact then it means that you're kind of carrying something with you into the next situation, and then into the next and into the next. And I think that to me is really detrimental to people's wellbeing, if we don't stop and acknowledge the emotionality of what we're doing, whether that is in terms of the impact it's having on us or looking at the impact on other people, but just acknowledging it. I think the miscomprehension of what Angie and Sheila were talking about here is not saying that you must bring emotion into it, it's actually just emotion's there, so acknowledge it and then you can deal with that. And I think that is really important, because I've misunderstood that at times, I think in terms of being a professional and, "right, I've got to just get on, I've got to put my feelings to one side and deal with it", and it's not true. You can't put them to one side, not permanently anyway. You do then need to address them, whether it's in dealing with the situations in practice or what you're seeing in research and the impact that that can have. And it doesn't mean having a complete outpouring of emotion in your research or practice, but it is about acknowledging it, definitely...

[00:20:06] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think that's really important, because I think when we have these conversations, the word that often gets brought up is "balance", in

terms of "when is it suitable?" It's not always suitable, as you say, to have this big outpouring of emotion, if you're in practice and working with someone that might not be the right thing to be doing in that moment. But that doesn't mean that you then just ignore that you're having those feelings. And there's something about how and when we do this in a way that is helpful for us and doesn't harm or hinder anyone else in the way that we do it.

[00:20:37] **Lesley:** Yeah, because I remember Sheila talking about it, she went through some sort of thought processes and emotions during her research, and acknowledging it wasn't her place to then put that onto the people that she was doing the research with, the participants. So it's about when's the right moment to acknowledge that, and to actually address it, because otherwise it's still going to be there. It doesn't just disappear.

[00:21:00] **Sarah:** Yeah, so there needs to be that space again, you know, this mystical space...

[00:21:07] **Lesley:** That exists somewhere...

[00:21:09] **Sarah:** Of course, it must.

And the last one, episode six, a conversation with Nicola and Demi, we talked to them about gendered perceptions of domestic violence, and how young females are more likely than young males to know controlling domestic violence behaviours.

[00:21:31] **Lesley:** That was really concerning, I think, another one that really impacted on the coercive and controlling behaviour, that people don't see it in that way. In fact, we've just had another classic *Love Island* situation, I don't even watch it, I don't watch *Love Island* but I hear the news about it, and the concern around this behaviour that just happens where it's an element of control, particularly of women, and it not being perceived like that. And with technology, I think they were talking about people being able to be monitored and things like that. And it's really worrying that that's happening and again it's not being able to step outside and look at it and think, "is this okay?", "Is this kind of behaviour okay in these relationships?". And I think that is really worrying, that you constantly see with situations, there's this constant thing of thinking "oh yes, well, we're much better at this than we used to be, and we're much better at seeing these issues", but they're still there. They're just in a slightly different way. And we've got to be able to be open to seeing, right,

how has it changed and how does it look now? Because I remember we had that discussion about what's domestic violence and what's domestic abuse? And it's still perceived as just violence as in physical, even though we've got all of these laws around this behaviour now, it's still not really understood, is it?

[00:23:04] **Sarah:** Yeah, there's still a lot of learning to be done, and in the wider general public. These things need to be learned by more than just, obviously practitioners need to understand that really well so that they can recognise and support people, but in the general population, it's clear that things like coercive control is not really understood, and actually these things are happening and people are not recognising it. And what was interesting I suppose, about their research, was the fact that young women were recognising it much more than young men were, and recognising a wider range of behaviours as being part of domestic abuse.

[00:23:47] **Lesley:** Yeah, definitely. And again, it sort of led us to how it's about this space to think isn't it? I mean, overall, that's what I remember we've, at times, I think we kept coming back to that as we were doing the podcast, weren't we, we kept thinking, "so basically we need some space and time to think, we need some space and time to think".

[00:24:04] **Sarah:** Yeah. But actually, we have said that, but as we're having this conversation I'm thinking actually it's not just that pausing and that space and that time to think, it's also then the communication and the conversations that need to happen. Because that's where reflection happens too. And actually being able to process that with someone, the emotions of it, the way that you're thinking about it, the impact it has on you, what's happening around you and how you feel about it. The time to stop and think is really important, that reflection, but actually then the conversation, and we were talking about this a little bit while we were having our caffeine before coming, because you were talking about how that might happen in social work teams and team meetings. And you were talking about the resources that might be available to support with that as well.

[00:24:55] **Lesley:** I think because it's not as well understood is it? Obviously in our workload, in universities, we do have, I can't remember what does it get termed as? But it is basically like the kind of idea of just having a chat with people and ruminating on things. And you can see that happening in private sector organisations who understand that creativity comes from actually just giving people that kind of environment in which it's comfortable and they can

talk. Because it's not just about an individual, like you said, it isn't just the thinking, it's actually the conversing because you do need other people to come with their thoughts that then trigger you to think about your own, and re-evaluate how you understand something. And I would be interested in what our listeners think about, about this, about that actual physical space, the mental space, the opportunities to engage with each other around bigger issues of the job and around reflecting on that rather than just the day-to-day management of what you need to do today, or this week, or this month. And I think *officially* we have that, but we don't feel we have that enough either, do we?

[00:26:04] **Sarah:** Yeah, well you create it in really informal ways I think, or at least that's how it works in our job. And I think from talking to social workers that might be similar as well. You know, when you're in the office, you might process particularly difficult cases. I think Lesley and I were saying before we came in to record this, we would really welcome the kind of use of this podcast and this particular episode to open up that conversation, because it is challenging. Our roles are busy, but we recognise, especially Lesley who has come from social work practice, just what that looks like in practice is a whole different kettle of fish isn't it? And actually the time to do these things that as researchers we're constantly saying, I think I've had that as something that's come up in every project about social work practice, that time to reflect and that reflection is really important, but when and how does that happen? When and how do those conversations happen? What supports it? What makes it difficult other than the pressures of the job? If anyone's got thoughts about that or ideas about things that can support that process and be useful, or just what they do in their day-to-day practice, we would really love to hear that. I'm trying to think about how we might hear that in terms of feeding back... I think you can leave comments under the podcast. I'm on Twitter. You're not on Twitter are you?

[00:27:26] **Lesley:** I'm not, no.

[00:27:27] **Sarah:** Well you can tweet at me on Twitter and tell me if you're listening to this, it's @SarahLonbay, and just let us know what you think, because we'd love to open that conversation up and hear what that looks like in practice and how people are doing that.

[00:27:43] **Lesley:** I would be happy for people to just contact us as well about this. Because we've got our university email addresses.

[00:27:50] **Sarah:** That's true, yeah, so drop us an email, Twitter, comments under the podcast, however you want to get in touch. Send a carrier pigeon, that's fine. Yeah, that would be great.

[00:28:00] **Lesley:** Yeah, absolutely. Because the last podcast was about these issues around domestic abuse and I think that's a really good way to link to what we want to do in the future, next steps, because we've been having a good think about that. Because we utilised some existing research within the university with the working papers that we've got to start this process and start thinking about things, but we've been thinking that actually we'd like to move on and go into a particular topic in more depth for the next series, which we're hoping people would like to listen to.

[00:28:37] **Sarah:** Yes, definitely. So we thought for the next series we would focus on domestic abuse, and looking at that across the life course. So we are going to be approaching and speaking to a range of different researchers who look at slightly different aspects of domestic abuse with different people and exploring that in detail through the next podcast series, which would be published hopefully early next year. So a bit of a gap while we recoup and record some new episodes, but we hope that you come back and listen to them again.

[00:29:11] **Lesley:** Hopefully! And hopefully we find what's useful for people, because obviously we've just done this on what we were thinking. We've done some research haven't we, Sarah, and got feedback around how people are using research in practice. And that's led us to think about the physical space of research that people give it in practice and some of the work that we're both doing on that. So we're gonna start to try and connect things up and listen to what feedback we've got and adapt as we go. But thank you so much, for those of you that are listening.

[00:29:47] **Sarah:** Yeah. Thank you. We've absolutely loved all of the conversations. Thank you to all of our guests as well, thanks to all of our listeners, all two of you or however many... No, that's really cynical, hopefully more than that! We will be looking, I think we can look at how many people have listened, so we'll check that out. But yeah, we will come back at some point with the series on domestic abuse and we will see you then. Or you will hear us then anyway.

[00:30:13] **Lesley:** They will hear us, I will see you, Sarah, and you will see me. Thank you very much.

[00:30:18] **Sarah:** Thank you, bye everyone.

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[00:30:22] **Sarah:** You have been listening to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work with me, Dr Sarah Lonbay.

[00:30:28] **Lesley:** And Dr Lesley Deacon. And this was funded by the University of Sunderland, edited by Paperghosts, and our theme music is called, *Together We're Stronger* by All Music Seven.

[00:30:39] **Sarah:** And don't forget that you can find a full transcript of today's podcast and links and extra information in our show notes. So anything you want to follow up from what you've heard today, check out there and you should find some useful extra resources.

See you all next time.

[00:30:53] **Lesley:** Bye.