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1

New Professionalism: The Challenge for Social Work Practice

Practice that can be evidenced as ethical and effective is a central feature of modern social work. It is embraced by both the professional and policy agendas and is emblematic of social work in the twenty-first century. Like most aspirations, it is open to interpretation and refinement by workers and by the agencies in which they are employed. In this context, ethical and effective practice is frequently confused with the emerging 'what works' agenda (McGuire and Priestley 1995) that reflects the need to justify outcomes, not only for the service user but often in terms of value for money. Good practice, from a professional perspective, is about more than effectiveness; it is also concerned with *how* outcomes are achieved – the ethical. What this means is that practice that is understood to be ethical and effective is likely to be moderated through both the individual worker's approach and the agency context. This raises issues over 'what works' for whom, why and in what way. For example, for front-line workers, 'what works' may mean meeting agency standards and government targets rather than responding to individual service users' needs. Alternatively it may help workers to set more realistic and achievable goals, enabling those using the service to feel valued and empowered to make choices. Therefore, whilst the criteria for measuring 'what works' may be contested, what underpins good practice with service users is less open to challenge. Workers need to be open and honest about their role and what can and cannot be achieved, working in partnership with both other agencies and service users to achieve that end. At the heart of this way of working is listening to what those using the service have to say, taking account of both their thoughts and their feelings, in relation not only to what is to be achieved, but also the manner in which it is to be done. In effect, ethical and effective practice includes consideration of how the

service is delivered as well as the achievement of outcomes. This is a point of view shared by service users themselves who, according to NISW (1996), value workers who respect them as people not problems and are open and honest about what they can do in practice.

When we start to consider good practice it becomes apparent that it is both ethical, in that the manner and means of creating change is important, and effective, in that it should achieve agreed outcomes between the service user and worker. In this context,

ethical practice requires workers to incorporate:

- a strong, empowering value base which incorporates an awareness of the worker's approach to practice and how this impacts on service delivery;
- anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles;
- accountability – both personal and professional.

Effective practice involves:

- a theoretical understanding of both the workers' and the service users' actions within a particular socioeconomic context;
- an understanding of the relevant current research evidence;
- a clear process of evaluation which incorporates the service user perspective.

Ethical Practice

Social work values, as Dominelli (2002a, p. 16) suggests, are 'socially constructed and historically specific'. This means that interpretations of what constitutes an appropriate value base for social work practice changes and evolves to meet the changing nature of the service environment. That process of change has been rapid in recent years (Mitchell 2000) but the emphasis on values and the associated ethical codes remains strong. Given that much of social work intervention takes place with individuals and groups within society who are disadvantaged and potentially vulnerable, it is, in our view, important for workers to be aware of their own values and how these may impact on the service user. The values held by workers will influence their approach to practice, as some approaches may be inconsistent with particular value stances. It is not our intention to explore values in detail, as these are more than adequately covered in

other texts (Banks 2001, 2004; Shardlow 2002). Social work values must, if they are to be meaningful in terms of partnerships with service users, take account of the impact of power within such relationships and we therefore wish to focus on empowerment as a fundamental social work value.

Empowerment in our experience is rarely a straightforward or simple activity for social workers. How it is defined and applied can have clear consequences for both workers and service users. In practice it has the potential to be used either as a subtle means of controlling behaviours or, more positively, can lead to a transformation of the use of power in order that service users have a greater say over the decisions affecting their lives (Beresford and Wilson 2000). Our concern is that, in the world of practice, all too often workers and their organisations individualise the concept, thereby locating the sources of disempowerment in the service user and empowerment in the worker. This is a perspective on empowerment that can lead social workers and service users to believe that the root cause of the problem is centred on them rather than on how society and its institutions are organised and structured. Service users in this model of empowerment, are often viewed as problematic and expected to use their limited power to fit into more 'socially acceptable' ways of responding and behaving.

The alternative to the individual approach has been termed 'democratic empowerment'. This democratic approach places structural oppression and disadvantage, and consequently collective ways of challenging existing power through anti-oppressive practice, at the centre of its analysis (Pugh and Thompson 1999). In this approach, empowerment centres not only on changing services but also on how service users are perceived and provided for by the wider society. Integral to this approach are the service users themselves, deciding upon their own services. It therefore avoids definitions of empowerment that can become expressions of professional and organisational power over users (Adams 1996). Payne (1997, p. 266) provides a good working definition for this approach when he says that empowerment is about helping, 'clients gain power of decisions and action over their own lives by reducing the effects of social or professional blocks to exercise the existing power, by increasing the capacity and self confidence to use power and by transferring power from environment to clients'. This definition challenges the notion that empowerment is something that workers do to service users and possibly that managers do to workers 'thus allowing the powerful to maintain control of the process' (Barry 1998, p. 2). Empowerment in this definition and application is not a gift to be bestowed on service users and therefore it is not in the power of social workers or their organisation to confer (Anderson 1996). Consequently, empowerment involves more than the powerful worker relinquishing power, it is also about locating service users within their

structural context and the oppression and inequality that can ensue. Within this approach, empowerment is perceived as a process and a goal rather than an event, a process that Dalrymple and Burke (1995) argue is underpinned by collaboration between the service user and the worker working in partnership. The worker therefore needs to acknowledge and utilise the capabilities and expertise of service users individually and collectively to effect change (DuBois et al. 1992). This democratic approach to empowerment provides an integrity and value base that enables social work to redefine itself as an activity in the modern state. It is also about workers moving beyond uncritical, reactive practice to sharing their knowledge and skills with those with whom they are working. Implicit in this approach is acknowledging that all service users, no matter how disadvantaged or oppressed, have a contribution to make to the resolution of their situation. What is crucial to this process of empowerment is that workers start to reflect upon their knowledge base, skills and values in order that they can look to improve their own practice. We should ensure that we are not fitting service users to our value base but conversely understanding that we as workers have the skills, knowledge and abilities to provide a service that fits the service users' needs. This has meant a redefining of professional social work and the notion of formal expertise and the control of power to incorporate more liberating and effective ways of practice that put the service user at the heart of the decision-making process (Lymbery 2004). Whilst emphasising the importance of democratic empowerment to good practice, we are not arguing that there is only one way to undertake the professional activity of social work. There are undoubtedly a number of approaches to practice within the modern social work environment, as we shall explore in the next chapter.

Social work is practised within a range of settings and is increasingly undertaken as part of integrated service delivery systems. This diversity occurs partly because utilisation of knowledge and skills is a contested activity in social work that enables different interpretations and values stances to be adopted. It is also due to the complex situations faced by those using the service confronting multiple oppressions on a daily basis. Even in the most straightforward of interactions with service users, workers have to be able to understand what the service users' experience means for them and how this perception is influenced and shaped by the nature of the wider community and society. Workers therefore need knowledge of how people function, their support networks and how society can influence and impact on everyday lives. This will be influenced for both worker and service user alike by 'differences of class, race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, culture, health, geography, expectations and outlook on life' (Trevithick 2000, p. 2). These issues rarely, if ever, have straightforward explanations and understandings that can be

agreed upon or universally applied. It is into this contested territory that good practice has to be understood and applied. Central to this is the acknowledgement that society is characterised by social injustice and that the role of the worker is to try to eradicate this, 'at least those forms of it which are reproduced in and through social work practice' (Dominelli 1998, p. 5). This is predicated on enabling service users, as far as possible, to have a say over the decisions that affect their lives and the way they should live. It is also a practice that requires a skilled response on the part of the worker to what are rarely simple or straightforward situations.

Social work practice does not take place in a vacuum in which workers are the sole arbiters of what is provided. While the professional integrity of individual workers is important, it is also influenced by both the agency and the society in which it is located. Arguably, modern social work is at a difficult junction between two competing ways of working that are often contradictory and conflicting in relation to each other. These are the growing clarity of 'new' professional practice, with its aim of empowering those using the service to effect change, and the influence of managerialism on organisation and service delivery. Workers do not practise independently but represent and act for the organisations in which they are employed. This has implications for the level of discretion and autonomy available in their daily practice (Hugman 1991; White 1999). Social work organisations are increasingly adopting an organisational ethos that reflects the ideas and values of managerialism with its top-down control of the decision-making and change processes (Clarke and Newman 1997). Whilst we are not in principle against the changes associated with managerialism, we are sceptical about its claim to create more efficient and effective services and are concerned about its effect on the development of an empowering practice. For example, the inclusion of service users and providers in the decision-making process closely fits the growing professional paradigm of empowerment and the wider value base of social work. Equally, the emphasis on the importance of changing ethos and culture to improve service fits closely with the notion of anti-oppressive practice and its analysis of societal and community influences (Dickens 1995; Adams 1998). In addition, the move towards clarity of expectation and desire to meet the customers' or service users' needs fits with the growing practice of partnership, contracts and access to information presently impacting on social work (Adams 1996, 1998). However, it is when applying these concepts in the top-down culture created by managerialism that the closeness of fit with empowering professional practice becomes more difficult to sustain and support.

This top-down, regulatory culture often means that the professional autonomy and decision-making of workers are colonised by strategic managers within the organisation of the local state (Clarke and Newman 1997).

The effect of this colonisation, as Parton and O'Byrne (2000, p. 44) point out, is 'ever more sophisticated systems of accountability and thereby attempts to rationalise increasing areas of social work activity via the activity of increasingly complex procedures and systems of audit – whereby it is assumed that the world can be subject to prediction and calculation'. Consequently, the decision-making role of the worker has increasingly been taken over by managers who decide the best ways of implementing policies within a particular context. According to Flynn (1997, p. 40), the right to manage in this context is 'the right to tell people what to do and expect them to do it'. It is not based on democratic empowerment but hierarchical structures that limit the abilities of workers to respond to situations and thus increase the control of management. The impact of these changes has arguably been systematically to undermine the autonomy of the individual social worker. This is discussed by Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996), who argue that the social work process is increasingly being broken down into small and routinised tasks which are then seen as outwith the professional remit and consequently can be carried out by workers with limited training and skills. This process is particularly apparent in relation to intake or duty systems, which are increasingly being redefined as 'receiving services', leading to new referrals being assessed in the first instance by unqualified workers (Watson 2002). In effect, managerialism can lead to a diminution of professional social work, as it fits a much more procedural and performance measurement perspective that is concerned with scrutiny, accountability and outcomes rather than emancipating those receiving the service. Our view is that, despite the inherent difficulties, social work and social workers must begin to assert the empowering practice agenda. This 'new professionalism' presents a considerable challenge to social work practice in the twenty-first century. Social work intervention is now taking place within an organisational culture that does not necessarily lend itself to democratic forms of empowerment and may even at times challenge the core values of social work as a professional discipline. In this respect we are not suggesting the notion of professionalism of social workers as aloof experts, but instead see social work as a professional activity based on working alongside service users and enabling them to take more control of their lives. An intention of this book is to explore how empowering practice can be achieved and to begin to address the challenges posed not just by managerialism but also by service users and their situations.

What this anti-oppressive ethos does bring to the fore for workers is the need to reflect upon and review their practice on an ongoing basis. Whilst this poses many challenges, it should hopefully guard against uncritically accepting 'the way it is done' which has gained credence over recent years, usually based on folklore and local custom. Our concern is that in this

commonsense approach, ethical and effective practice occurs at best by chance rather than by design as workers constantly react to situations rather than reflect upon and plan their interactions with service users and other agencies. It also diminishes the role of formal learning (Trevithick 2000) and means that practice is rarely reviewed for its effectiveness or whether it enables service users to have a greater say over their lives. Whilst thinking on one's feet, a key component of this commonsense approach, is undoubtedly an important social work skill, it is not the main determinant of professional practice. Ethical and effective practice requires workers to utilise a range of skills and to incorporate knowledge obtained from both practice and theoretical learning. It requires them constantly to review their values and reflect on how these are impacting on work at all levels. In essence, ethical and effective social work practice becomes a process of thought and reflection as well as action that considers how to provide a high-quality service.

These difficulties and uncertainties are typified by Susan's situation. We shall return throughout the text to this case study to help illustrate particular aspects of practice. She, like the other case studies used in this book, represents an amalgam of the many families we have worked with over the years.

Susan's Story

Susan, a 23-year-old woman with two children, was referred to social work services by the family health visitor following a suicide attempt. During the initial visit by the social worker it came to light that Susan was a lone parent who had started to suffer postnatal depression following the birth of her second child six months earlier. She and the children lived in a small, privately rented flat which was sparsely decorated. In essence, Susan lived in only one room with her children as she was afraid to allow them into the other areas of the house because of her concerns that they might hurt themselves. Susan had accumulated considerable debts over the previous three years and owed money to all the utility companies and to a series of credit card companies. She had little family support in the area and could see no point to her life as she had been virtually confined to the family home for the previous six months. She was unable to get the children into nursery school and was physically run down as a result of having little or no respite. She also had a number of other physical and emotional health problems that were being treated at the local health centre.

Susan's world reflects the complex lives of people using social services, few of whom are referred with single, easily resolved problems. Instead, as with Susan, their problems are complex and interrelated in a way that makes their

resolution difficult. For example, Susan's concerns regarding childcare were also tied in with her financial situation. Her debts and dependency on state benefit meant she could not afford safety equipment for her home. The consequence of this was her need constantly to attend to the care of her children. She felt that, like her own parents, she was providing a poor role model, as she was constantly chastising her children rather than spending fun time with them. This brief outline of Susan's situation raises questions that social workers have to deal with on a daily basis, particularly, in this situation, obtaining a balanced understanding of Susan's past and present and the factors that oppressed her in her social context. The worker involved in this case would also have to bridge an understanding between Susan and wider society and then find ways of working that did not leave her discriminated against because of the situation in which she found herself. From a feminist perspective, for example, Susan's situation as a lone female carer had more to do with structural oppression than with any individual issues she might have (Abbott and Wallace 1997). The starting point from this perspective would therefore be shaped by the need to challenge the patriarchal nature of the oppression impacting on Susan's life. However, given Susan's multiple concerns, other forms of analysis would be possible, which means that the nature of the work and its starting point would be difficult to determine. As a consequence, this often means that intervention, and the level of intervention required, need to be negotiated around the service users' perception of their situation if they are to feel confident and empowered.

Work between Susan and her social worker would not take place in a vacuum and would consequently also be influenced by agency policy, government guidance and statute. Any social worker involved in this situation would have to consider the wellbeing and welfare of the children, a complex task given that the information provided by the referrer would suggest that they were potentially at risk but also loved and cared for by their mother. In this context, Susan herself would have to be assessed and supported in terms of her ability to fulfil her roles and responsibilities in relation to her children. Social work support is no longer just about care, but also about control and the complex interplay of these two factors (Parton 1985). Working with Susan would, therefore, require the social worker to consider the issue of support and empowerment to help her develop as a person and create a better life for both herself and the children. However, it would also entail the need for vigilance in relation to the care and protection provided to the children, raising questions about the extent to which Susan could operate autonomously in terms of her actions and choices. The social worker might, therefore, consider that Susan's situation was less than voluntary (Trotter 1999). It is for these reasons that social work is such a complex activity, as it deals with the area of human experience of those suffering from multiple problems, many of which are arguably outwith the individual's own control. It is when we start to consider Susan's situation that it becomes apparent how difficult an activity social work is to define, operating in the contested, non-consensual world of how we perceive and organise our society.

Developing a Framework for Effective and Ethical Practice

Despite our belief that best practice is about making the links between individuals and the wider societal oppression they face, this book will adopt the individual worker as the focus of such practice. In adopting this stance we are not suggesting that workers should reject the macro, structural perspectives or political activities as a focus of social work practice. For example, from a worker's perspective, clearly the more controlling forms of managerialism require to be challenged directly, particularly when they detract from quality services and the ability of workers to develop empowering practice (Lymbery and Butler 2004). We are, however, arguing that micro work also has the potential to be anti-oppressive and empowering for those receiving the service. As Coulshed (1991, p. 3) points out, 'Human beings remain at the centre of our concern, the raison d'être of our enterprises; thus face-to-face work is a prominent part of social work practice.' How individual workers go about their task and the knowledge, skills and values they hold will impact on all aspects of their work, from the first contact with the service user to assessment, work over time, termination and evaluation. It is our view that in an occupation such as social work the *process* (what we do) is as important as the *outcome* (what is achieved). To ignore this is to fail to recognise the fundamental importance of the worker critically to influence people's lives.

The first step in this process of developing ethical and effective practice for the individual worker is examining his/her own personal development and how to go about acquiring the skills, knowledge and values to be the type of worker he/she wants to become. This is not a neutral process, but one that should reflect the worker's knowledge, understanding, awareness and motivation. In this respect, ethical and effective practice depends on what we think social work is about and how we go about trying to achieve that goal. Therefore, whilst not claiming to have definitive answers, we believe that it should include the following:

- acknowledging service users as individuals who are affected by structural forces that impact on their lives;
- acknowledging service users as experts in their own lives and building upon their strengths;
- being honest and open with realistic and achievable goals agreed by all;

- developing a skilled and knowledgeable practice that is open about the value stance of the worker;
- learning from others' experiences and observations – be it from research studies or descriptions of good individual practice;
- critically and constructively reviewing our own practice in order to generate more relevant and up-to-date practice research;
- evaluating from the perspective not just of the worker or agency but also of the service user.

Ethical and effective practice is about acquiring the necessary knowledge and values and developing the professional skill to implement these with a diverse range of service users. In other words it is about our approach to social work practice.

Summary of Chapter

1. Good practice is both effective and ethical, emphasising both process and outcome for the service user. It places the service user at the heart of the process of intervention.
2. How the worker interprets and applies core values such as empowerment is crucial to process of practice. Empowerment can be defined to either individualise the service user's situation or alternatively to include wider societal structures. Good practice would entail moving beyond individualising the service user and locating the problem with him/her to seeing the individual within a community/societal context.
3. Social work is influenced by the agency context, which creates challenges and limitations for workers. Arguably social work is at a crossroads between two competing paradigms – managerial and anti-oppressive. In this respect the managerial agenda has the potential to create an ethos that emphasises effectiveness and outcome at the expense of process and ethics. Its top-down nature can also be restrictive of democratic definitions of empowerment, as formal decision-making power is located in the higher echelons of the organisation. Workers need to assert the professional agenda in the context of their everyday practice to act as a counterbalance to the growing influence of managerialism.

4. Social work practice is rarely a straightforward activity, but instead is characterised by complexity related to a range of oppressions impacting on both the service user's and the worker's situation. Unthinking, reactive practice is not enough to meet service users' needs or provide a good service. Instead, good practice is a skilled activity where workers constantly reflect on their knowledge, skills and values to make sense of the complex situations that service users face.

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