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1

Introduction

Effective communication is an essential component of social work and social care which includes, for example, providing basic care, giving advice, making assessments, providing care packages, counselling, writing reports, acting as advocates for service users, and working in interdisciplinary settings with health, education, housing and criminal justice. It is necessary for social workers to have effective communication skills if they are to promote self help and empowerment. While the language of community care planning, with its emphasis on care management, brokerage, the purchaser/provider split and devolved budgets, sounds technocratic and impersonal, care managers and providers need to use a range of communication and interpersonal skills if community care is really to mean real choice and personalized services for service users. Social workers in childcare, whether protection or prevention, field or residential, and staff providing professional care and control in criminal justice also need to use a range of communication and interpersonal skills.

While major problems facing users of social work services remain those of poverty and discrimination or oppression on the basis of race, class, gender, age, disability and any amelioration or solution requires political and structural change, social workers and social care workers are faced with the immediate impact of structural problems on individuals and families and the need to work with them to improve on or ameliorate their particular situations. They are also faced with more individual problems, for example, in relation to attachment and loss (Aldgate, 2007; Rochford, 2007). This engagement in direct interaction requires the use of the range of communication skills examined in this book.

One reason for wanting to write this book, therefore, was that communication skills are at the core of social work and social care, and, indeed also interprofessional work in health, education and criminal justice. A second reason was that understanding and knowledge about effective communication is derived from a variety of sources, for example social

psychology, evaluation research, social work theory, and research into users' and carers' perceptions of social work. This range of knowledge requires integration and application to social work. A third reason is that, while training in social work acknowledges the importance of communication skills, our knowledge about their use in real practice is very limited. Partly this is because in many settings, particularly fieldwork and secondary settings, social work has been an 'invisible' profession, practised in private and unobserved (Pithouse, 1987). Partly it is because few research studies examined, even descriptively, workers' behaviour and interaction with clients (Baldock and Prior, 1981; Lishman, 1985), let alone attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of different communication techniques and styles.

My aims in this volume are:

- to draw together knowledge from different sources about the communication skills we need for effective social practice in social work and social care and to present these in a clear, readily available way;
- to apply this knowledge to social work and social care in a range of contexts and settings;
- to help the reader then draw on this knowledge to apply to his or her own practice;
- to help the reader reflect on and be aware of his or her own communication and its impact.

Let us consider the following two social workers. The first is interviewing a female service user who referred herself to her GP because she was anxious that she was punishing her seven-year-old son excessively. In the interview the social worker's voice is gentle and soft. She appears attentive and listens carefully. She checks that she has understood what the woman is saying. She smiles frequently, her face is expressive and she appears warm, interested and sympathetic. Her responses are supportive to the woman and she reinforces positive behaviour on her part, e.g. 'Don't play it down. Aren't you pleased to have managed that?' She clarifies what the woman says, and shows verbally that she is understanding her.

In contrast a worker is interviewing a young man who is on a probation order, and who has just re-offended by serious housebreaking. In the interview the social worker's voice sounds rather cold and harsh. She fidgets and moves about impatiently as if she has heard it all before. She does not smile and her face is impassive and serious: her only facial expression is to frown. She questions in quite an abrupt way, 'Well, what was it about, then?' and rejects the answer, 'I know it was about house-

breaking but ...? She does not appear supportive and does not check out her understanding of the young man. Her responses are often critical and she confronts the probationer with her scepticism about his future behaviour and ability to stay out of prison.

These are two very different service users with different problems and agendas observed in two different interviews and two different communication styles on the part of the worker. Interestingly, the social worker is the same person!

The interviews are described because they raise central questions about communication in social work. What skills are used? Do these skills change in response to the person requiring a service? Does a social worker use the same skills regardless of the user of service or the problem? Can we say that individual social workers have individual communication styles? The answers to these questions are descriptive. We need also to ask what communication skills are effective and, more specifically, what communication skills are effective in what settings, with which specific users of services and for what purposes? These questions are evaluative. As workers in social work and social care we need to reflect on both of these questions. What is my preferred individual communication style and how am I perceived? How effective is my communication?

The answers, in so far as there are answers, are drawn from a range of sources. Social psychology can help us to understand the meaning and interpretation of our non-verbal and symbolic behaviour, the relevance of class, race and gender to verbal communication, and influences on interpersonal perception, such as stereotyping. Behavioural theory reminds us of the importance of reinforcement and modelling.

Research into clients' perceptions in the 1970s and 1980s and into the views of service users thereafter, gives us clear feedback about social workers' communication skills or lack of them (Trevithick *et al.*, 2004). Evaluative research in social work, psychotherapy and counselling highlights the importance of the worker showing empathy, warmth and genuineness – the 'core conditions' for effective helping – and of the use of contract-based intervention and focussed intervention methods such as task-centred work.

Practice theory in social work has confidently prescribed how we ought to behave and communicate. Unfortunately the evidence to support such prescription is more limited. Although a great deal has been written about the beliefs, knowledge and qualities expected of social workers, there remains a debate about the nature of social work practice and a lack of empirical knowledge about the skills we use which distinguish social work from other professions.

This book draws upon practice theory, even where it has not been rigorously researched, provided it is supported by collective practice experience and evidence from relevant sources such as social psychology or evaluation research.

It also draws on colleagues', students' and my own practice experience: practice experience and wisdom must contribute to the development of knowledge and theory in social work, but equally social workers need to draw on relevant research and evidence (Lishman, 2007).

Policy development, as outlined in the Preface, is the social policy context in which communication in social work and social care is practised. Particular relevant policy agendas are:

- the involvement of service users and carers in the development and evaluation of policy and practice;
- the importance of providing personalized service (Leadbetter, 2004);
- the necessity of developing and using evidence-based and research-minded practice;
- the importance of integrated services and interdisciplinary work;
- the relevance and application of new information and communication technologies (ICT).

In relation to the involvement of service users and carers we also need to pay attention to the views of users of services who feel they are *involuntary*, e.g. in criminal justice and in childcare and protection and in mental health.

Terminology in relation to people who use social work and social care services is complicated. As Cree and Davis (2006) comment, 'The term "service user" has been used for a number of years in preference to the term "client" as a convenient and neutral shorthand expression to denote those who are receiving social work services' (p. 3). The term 'patient' in relation to the National Health Service and health care is universal. However, in social work and social care people who receive services are not a homogeneous group. For example, carers who receive services may have specific requirements which are very different from those of service users who receive services. Not all users of services wish to receive the service they are given: in child protection and criminal justice they are compelled to receive service as involuntary 'service users'. Professionals engaged in social work and social care may themselves be service users or carers. They may historically have been involuntary service users.

In this edition I use the generic term 'users of services' to include voluntary and involuntary service users and also carers. Where different perceptions in relation to communication emerge I will define more specifically which group of 'users of services' is being referred to.

In relation to the personalization of services agenda (Leadbetter, 2004) for all users of services, voluntary or involuntary, carer or service user we need to draw on the range of their perceptions about what they experienced. Did the communication between the agency, worker and user of services contribute to a personalized experience rather than a more routine one? Did it contribute to useful and effective outcomes? Where might the limits of a personalization agenda lie? Cox (2008), for example, is very clear in relation to family group conferencing: ‘Not all families are their own experts’ (p. 80). In order to attempt to address these questions we need to use an evidence-based approach (Lishman, 2007) where it is available, but also a critical reflective approach to practice (Fook, 2007). We need to practise by using and applying the best available evidence *and* our critical reflective analysis of this evidence.

Chapter 2 examines research findings on what users of services believe constitute helpful and effective communication. Rees and Wallace (1982) argued that these judgements were the most important criteria in evaluating social work and the personal social services. They believed that social workers’ accountability to users of services should take ‘precedence over accountability to agency or profession and that, in response to problems which are largely structural, social workers’ responsibility is never to lose sight of the needs of the most powerless people’ (p. 58). This must involve seeking and actively responding to their perceptions and evaluations.

This tension between accountability to the agency and accountability to users of services has remained, as has the tension between resources available and the requirements of and need to empower users of services.

The chapter integrates relevant findings from the earlier client-based literature with an examination of how, more recently, users and carers have evaluated the effectiveness of the communication they experienced from social workers and more generally in social care.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine different kinds of communication: symbolic, non-verbal, verbal and written. Symbolic communication involves aspects of our behaviour and presentation – such as punctuality, dress, the kind of food we provide in residential care, and the kind of basic care we give – which convey a symbolic as well as literal message to users of services about our respect or basic care for them or about the power relationship between us. Non-verbal communication is precisely that; not spoken communication but communication through behaviour such as facial expression, gaze, orientation and body movement.

Verbal communication is what we say and includes questioning, reflection, focussing, summarizing, challenging and confrontation. Ver-

bal communication involves the use of language, and we need to be aware that the worker and the users of services may not share the same language. Interpretation, with its implications for clear communication, may be necessary.

Written communication is essential work, not least in terms of recording and accountability. Communication by information technology has begun to replace written communication as a means of case recording but it is also a means of direct communication with vulnerable users of service (Rafferty, 2000). The use of information technology in communication with users of services is therefore an integral part of this book.

Subsequent chapters apply different kinds of communication to different purposes of social work. Chapter 5 examines relationship building and maintaining, and the skills of conveying genuineness, warmth, acceptance, encouragement, empathy and responsiveness. Chapter 6 examines the skills involved in attending and listening, including the use of silence. Chapter 7 is about sharing information: getting information by using reflection, paraphrasing, clarification, questioning and probing, and giving information and advice in either verbal or written form. Chapter 8 examines the use of contracts and the skills involved: summarizing, focussing and negotiation. Finally, Chapters 9 and 10 examine intervention skills and means of helping users of services to achieve change in attitudes or behaviour. Here we are concerned with the use of influence, both with skills like questioning, probing, advising, summarizing and focussing which were examined previously and with new skills such as interpretation and confrontation.

The skills identified and examined throughout the book are transferable skills. They are applicable across a range of settings, including group care, fieldwork and secondary settings, and to a range of users of services, including children, older people, people with learning difficulties, people with mental health problems and people with disabilities. They need to be applied with full understanding of the implications of structural differences, e.g. class, gender, age and ethnicity, for effective communication.

These transferable skills need to be used with colleagues. The skills involved in engaging, listening, negotiating and challenging are equally relevant to communication in work groups and multidisciplinary teams. I hope that readers will find the examination and discussion of skills applicable not only to working with users of services, but transferable to interdisciplinary communication in their work settings.

Finally, writing about communication is inevitably limited and problematic. Communication is an activity which has to be performed and practised. In order to develop skills, feedback has to be sought and acted

upon. The reader must therefore first consider and reflect on the discussion in this book, but also, and more importantly, consider how to apply, use and practise the skills identified in each chapter, and seek feedback from users of services and colleagues or video in order to develop further competence in using them.

putting it into practice

Knowledge about communication is drawn from a number of disciplines. Reflect on your own sources of knowledge about communication skills. They may not refer to areas of social care but your own experiences of who you perceived to communicate effectively and why and how.

Consider the two service users described in this introduction and how they were treated by the same social worker. Reflect on how you, like the social worker, communicate verbally and non-verbally with different people, and why and how.

Recommended reading

The SCIE website (www.scie.org.uk) provides useful knowledge reviews, for example 'Teaching and Learning Skills in Social Work Education' (2004), 'Teaching Learning and Assessment Skills with Children and Young People in Social Work Education' (2006), 'Types and Quality of Knowledge in Social Care' (2003).

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