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GENERALIST SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: APPROACHES, PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract:-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. Effective practice requires workers to develop a conscious awareness of their approach. The worker's orientation to the task will draw upon a number of aspects including an understanding of society and how it works; an awareness of wider political issues; personal and professional values; current knowledge base and organisational and cultural aspects of the agency. There are three broad categories of approach to practice: procedural, individual pathology and progressive. Each has its own unique response to service users and will in turn affect the processes of assessment, implementation, termination and evaluation. Developing an approach to practice assists workers to develop a clear sense of their own professional persona and the skills they require in order to be effective. In this context, theory for practice is as important as understanding grand and middle-range theories. It will be influenced by the worker's approach, an awareness of what is effective and a clear understanding of the organisational context in which the work occurs.

Keywords:Generalist Social Work Practice, conscious awareness, practice assists, understanding of organization,

INTRODUCTION :-

Social work as a professional activity is a challenging task to all social workers. The social work role and task is not simply about action and good intentions, creditable and important as these are for many people who need and require support in their lives. It is also about thinking, planning and empowering those using the service and it therefore needs workers to develop a conscious awareness of their own approach to practice. This should enable workers to be aware of how their own knowledge, skills and values impact on the service user's situation. By maintaining this level of artistry (Ruch 2000), workers are less likely solely to become the procedural imperatives of the managerial agenda. It is our view that the development of each worker's approach to practice requires to be undertaken in a reflective and deliberate manner, as this will underpin every other aspect of professional activity and process.

So what do we mean by an approach to practice? Essentially, it is about the workers' orientation to the task and how they use their knowledge, skills and values in practice. This will draw upon a number of different elements. Whilst this is by no means an exhaustive list, these include:

- an understanding of society and how it works;
- an understanding of wider political issues and agency agendas;
- an understanding of personal and professional values.

An understanding of society and how it works. As we shall discuss when we examine specific approaches in more detail, workers develop awareness during their professional training of a range of ways of understanding the individual within the context of the wider society. This enables them to build their own theoretical understanding of the interrelationship between the individual and society that will be influential in deciding about the causation of a particular area of difficulty in the individual's circumstances. An oversimplification would be to suggest that an understanding of society enables the worker to make a judgement about where responsibility for specific situations should rest. Howe (1987) suggests that there are two key questions that social workers need to answer in the context of the individual and society. The first is related to how you see people. Are they subjects who have free will and choice, or are they 'objects' who are controlled, responsive to the environment in which they reside. In essence, what is the psychological position that you hold? The second question is related to the nature of society, or how you consider sociological issues. Do you live in a society that supports and has rules and regulations, where people tend to pull together and are cared for, or do you live in a society where people are in conflict, where there is a constant striving for power and position. Is society regulated for all to benefit or does it reflect the needs and issues of the powerful? What is the sociological theory of society you hold? Making sense of these questions involves adopting a paradigm for practice - an approach to social work. All workers use theories, be it in the context of social work or of life in general. Therefore, it is better to be explicit about one's theory base and one's assumptions about people and society, so that these are open to scrutiny rather than hidden away and unaccountable. How you answer these questions and their interrelationship will shape how you see the world and, equally importantly, how you view the role and task of social work in working with those using the service (Howe 1987).

An understanding of wider political and agency issues can manifest itself in a number of ways when developing an approach to practice. Some workers will come to the social work task with a very clearly defined political perspective which shapes their understanding of the issues and situations they encounter. Others may be less overtly political but will still be influenced by the wider political climate. Given that much of the activity of social work practice is defined by law (Braye and Preston-Shoot 1998), even the most apolitical of workers need to work with the consequences of political decisions. Each worker needs to make a personal judgement about how to respond to these political pressures, some of which are more subtle than others. Workers providing a service within the youth justice area, for example, may find themselves constrained by a political perspective that places the responsibility for all aspects of antisocial conduct with the individual offender. Such a perspective is likely to resource only those aspects of the social work response which relate directly to reducing sufferings, while the individual worker's perspective may be much more holistic (Waterhouse et al. 2004). In an environment where there is heavy emphasis and support for one particular perspective, workers will find it difficult to sustain an alternative world-view. This can lead to the development of a rather prescriptive response by workers who may cease to individualize complex situations owing to the narrow range of resource options available. In this respect the culture and organisation of the agency where the social work task is undertaken will also have an influence on the approach of the worker. Some agencies, particularly those in the voluntary sector which have a very specific remit, are able to articulate a very clear set of norms and expectations. Any worker employed by such an agency is likely to share these cultural expectations to some extent and these will set the parameters of acceptable approaches to practice.

The difficulty for many workers is that the norms and expectations of social work organisations are not always clearly articulated to workers and the process of being absorbed into the culture of the organisation remains more subtle. What is important in this context is that workers operate in an environment that impacts on their ability both to define and to deliver a service. This is not to suggest that individual workers are not able to influence the service; clearly they are in practice. What is important is that they reflect on their political stance and its implications for themselves, the agency and the service user. Failure to do this may mean that workers unquestionably adopt an approach that reflects the needs of the agency, which may not necessarily be those of the service user. Alternatively it can mean that workers are unable to deliver the service that they have agreed with the service user, as it is not within their power to provide it. In working out this aspect of your approach, you are fundamentally asking questions about the kind of agency you want to work for, not just in terms of what it should provide but, more importantly, in terms of what it does provide.

An understanding of personal and professional values also plays a significant role in the development of an approach to practice. Every social worker needs to develop the ability to scrutinise his/her value base on an ongoing basis. The ability constantly to examine one's own values and their potential impact on service delivery is one of the crucial hallmarks of professional social work practice (Banks 2001). This is overlaid by standards and codes of practice that define expectations in terms of professional values (HMSO 2000; GSCC 2002). While these are set within particular parameters, they are not generally prescriptive, allowing for some degree of individual interpretation.

The knowledge base and how workers are able to use this constructively will also influence the approach to practice. The more expansive the range of knowledge from which workers can draw, the greater the choices in terms of their ability to apply their approach. Workers who actively maintain their current knowledge base and who retain an active interest in theory and research, in this view, much less likely to adopt an uncritical, ill-defined approach to practice. Strategies for maintaining a culture of learning within practice will be explored more fully later in this text, but it is important at this point to emphasise the crucial role of critical reflection in the pursuance of a truly professional approach to practice (Schon 1987; Fook 2002). The approach to practice adopted by workers will influence the assessment process and the nature of any subsequent intervention. This means that each individual worker will respond uniquely to what may appear to be very similar sets of circumstances. It is part of the challenge of good social work practice to be able to articulate clearly the reasons for the many choices being made

throughout the social work relationship. Good practice values the uniqueness of the individual the development of formulaic responses to situations. It would be our view that the approach to practice being adopted needs to be communicated clearly to service users if the relationship is to be truly participative and inclusive. Social work writers (Howe 1987; Payne 1997; Dominelli 1998) suggest that there are a number of ways in which approaches to practice can be categorised. We have chosen to identify three approaches which we consider to be prevalent across a range of social work agencies:

the procedural approach;
the individual pathology approach;
the progressive approach.

As with any taxonomy, these are broad categories that encompass within them a range of perspectives. They do, however, offer a starting point from which to explore the existing diversity and potential approaches to practice.

PROCEDURAL APPROACH

This approach is based on a view of the world where individuals are seen as objects who fit into a consensus perspective in society (Howe 1987). It has gained considerable credence over the last two decades and considers, in essence, that the function of social work is to contribute to the maintenance of the systems that make up society (Davies 1994). This approach presumes that the nature of service-user problems is rooted in individual actions and decisions, rather than more generally about any injustice inherent in our organisations and institutions. Consequently, those who are not able to, or do not fit within the system are seen as responsible or at fault for their situation, often exhibiting behaviours or actions that are seen as 'abnormal' or 'deviant' (Becker 1963).

The role of the worker in this context is to enable service users to cope with or adopt more 'acceptable' forms of behaviour so that both they and society can benefit from the professional intervention offered. In the main this will be a technical activity that sees the workers' actions as value-free, pragmatic and providing what Dominelli (1998, p. 4) terms 'information about resources and possibilities'. Practice will be concerned with helping and enabling individuals to fit in to society, either for their own benefit or for the greater good. This is not to say that this approach will never challenge or be concerned about the system, but in the main its focus is on individuals fitting the system rather than the system fitting the individual. This is because society itself is seen at best as working positively, at worst as neutral in relation to service users' problems. Consequently, concerns about social justice and anti-oppressive practice will not have a high priority for the worker in this approach. Instead, as Payne (1997, p. 5) points out, it will be about the 'individual's needs'. Relating this to empowerment, this will take place at the level of consumers or customers exercising their rights to complain or exit the service, rather than a democratic interpretation that may seek to challenge the system itself. It is about what Drummond (1993) terms 'first order change': that is, change within the system rather than about the system itself. The procedural approach tends to deal with service users' problems as surface issues, which are observable, rather than as issues having underlying causes. It is consequently more amenable to theories and methods that fit these criteria, particularly those that are able to define, categorise and measure, such as behaviouralism or the task-centered method. It is also an approach that tends to place the worker in the role of 'expert', identifying and classifying problems and subsequent solutions.

This approach has a close fit with modern managerial culture and its ethos of dealing with observable issues, measuring and evaluating practice; it is often contained within procedures and codes of practice (Dominelli and Hoogvelt 1996; Watson 2003). This is most apparent in the area of assessment with its growing frameworks of risk and identification of indicators and criteria for appropriate involvement (Pratt 2000). The procedural approach is ultimately concerned about 'what works' and it emphasises short-term and direct intervention. Its attraction for workers is that it provides a degree of certainty about their actions. This is illustrated by the following case study. Like others in the text, we shall return to this case study at various points to illuminate understanding of particular issues.

INDIVIDUAL PATHOLOGY APPROACH

This approach focuses on the individual pathology perceived within a given situation that once again is based on a functionalist/consensus view of society (Haralambos et al. 2004). Individuals are seen as subjects rather than objects, who, with appropriate help and counselling, can be enabled to live a more 'healthy' lifestyle. This is an approach with a long history in social work dating back to the 1930s that has come under increasing challenge and scrutiny (Payne 1997). The function of the worker will be to help service users fit more effectively into their families, communities and society. However, to do this means that the worker, through listening to past actions and present problems, needs to enable service users to obtain better explanations and responses than they hold at present (Dominelli 1998). This approach considers that the root of the service users' difficulties resides in them as individuals and in particular how they have been socialised throughout the lifespan (Bee and Boyd 2003). Whilst there are a wide range of potential responses, in the main they tend to be more concerned with individual pathology and underlying problems rather than with social structure and oppression. Anti-oppressive practice is less frequently given priority, as service users are seen as being 'unhealthy' or 'deviant' and not conforming to the prevailing social norms, rather than account being taken of the wider structural factors.

The role of the worker in this approach is about 'seeking the best possible well being for individuals, groups and communities in society' (Payne 1997, p. 4) in order that they can grow and become self-fulfilled. This is linked to traditional values around respect, self-determination and confidentiality and implies that the worker will facilitate personal growth in the service user. This will be done by utilising a range of skills aimed at enabling the service user to obtain insight or a positive perspective from which to live. The different methods within this approach tend to place the worker in the role of the expert who, in a caring manner, provides the framework for possible solutions to problems, most of which would be about the individual changing his or her behaviour to fit the needs of the wider society.

This approach has not fitted closely with modern managerial culture as it does not easily lend itself to measurement and evaluation. It often has vague and open-ended goals, which can lead to long-term intervention around developing healthy or more appropriate social functioning (Howe 1995). This is not to suggest that it is an uncritical practice; in fact it is the opposite, constantly requiring reflection and consideration of action and activities. Its attraction for workers is that it considers what is going on lower than the surface and therefore can be seen to offer the possibility of 'real' change rather than dealing with the symptoms of the problem, arguably reflecting the difficulties and uncertainty of the real world of the service user (Payne 1997). This offers the possibility of professional development as skills and knowledge need constantly to be worked on and updated. In terms of service users, it is based on similar values to the procedural approach, i.e. individualisation, but is liable to be less congruent in the area of results and clarity of outcomes.

PROGRESSIVE APPROACH

This approach has also been growing in influence in recent years, particularly within social work education and practice (Lymbery and Butler 2004). In many respects this may be argued to be not an approach but an amalgamation of a number of perspectives that share one common dimension - social justice. In this context the views may share as many differences as similarities. What they have in common is a conflict view of society. However, within the approach it is possible to see the individual as object or subject. The function of social work in this approach is to enable those at the receiving end of oppression to challenge its sources, including the institution of social work and the state (Dominelli 2002a). Service users' situations or problems are in the main less likely to be considered as emanating from their own behaviour or pathology, but are the result of inequalities or unfair power relations that often lead to them being 'victims' rather than the creators of the situation. Consequently, this approach is not about fitting service users to the system, but about empowering them to gain greater awareness of their oppression and to challenge systems.

The role of social work in this approach is to enable those who experience oppression to be able to understand and take more control over their lives (Dominelli 2002a). It is not about workers being 'experts' but rather it is about them using their skills to facilitate change. The 'expert' in terms of this approach would be the service user who knows his/her life and capabilities. The worker's skills and knowledge would be in relation to the system and the ability to create the conditions and support for service users to restructure or exert their power. The worker may be intervening at the micro level of the individual's day-to-day issues and systems, or intervention may be at the more macro level of communities where the worker helps facilitate change. This is not a technical or value-free activity, but one that is undoubtedly based on values and political beliefs about the nature of people and society. This approach is centered on anti-oppressive practice, concerned with 'second order change' - that is, change to the system itself (Drummond 1993), although this does not rule out the possibility of having first order change. This approach, depending on the perspective held, will give greater or lesser emphasis to underlying issues for the service user. Once again, this will depend on the answer to the object/subject question. Therefore consciousness-raising can be about either narrative methods or biography or about political action, or a mixture of both. In this respect it is a critical and constructive practice based on both reflection and action. Relating this to empowerment, we move away from the notion of consumers and customers to that of citizenship; service users are kept informed of what the worker is thinking and why and are enabled to have a say in decisions that impact on their lives (Evans and Harris 2004).

Arguably, one of the key tasks of modern social work is to enable people to make sense of their position vis-a-vis the state. The attraction of this approach for workers resides in the fact that it tries to bridge the gap between the individual and society, thereby potentially recognising all aspects of the person and society (Thompson 1998). In terms of service users, it shares the value base of other approaches in respecting people and their situations. However, results may be less clear depending on the perspective within the approach. It could be claimed that the more overtly political the worker's stance, the more vague and less measurable the work becomes in practice.

NEW PROFESSIONALISM: THE CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social Work 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 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 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.

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 provider 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 managerial system of 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 managerial system 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 managerial system, 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 managerial system 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 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, managerial system can lead to a decrease 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.

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 practices occurs at best by chance rather than by design as workers constantly reacts 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.

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 managerial system 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, 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.

The Kind of Social Worker Do You Want to Be

As academics, it would be extraordinary if we could enable our students to adopt our favoured approach and to

practice from that perspective. However, even if this were desired, it would not be possible as students' knowledge, skills and values and subsequent approach will be personal to them and their experience. This has to be the individual worker's starting point. What we are more realistically concerned about workers try to develop an awareness of their approach in order to have a more open and reflective practice that critically and constructively examines what kind of service is being provided. The reason workers need to reflect on their approach is that it determines how they will see themselves as practitioners and in particular how they relate to those using the service. A possible difficulty about reflecting on one's approach is that the different approaches use the same language and concepts, but what they mean in practice can differ significantly. Therefore, when we consider our approach it is important to have an awareness of what is being provided by the worker and experienced by the service user. For example, partnership from a procedural or individual pathology approach would, in the main, include informing service users of what is going to happen, but does not necessarily mean they would have a say over that activity, as the role of the worker - the 'expert' - would be to define the problem and determine the solution.

Partnership would mean that the service user was kept informed of intentions and actions. However, partnership from the progressive approach would be to acknowledge the worker's role and authority with the service user and the purpose of the interaction, to establish what was negotiable in that context and then to enable the service user to be part of the problem identification and problem solving process. Partnership in this context would be about information sharing and joint decision making. In both situations we would be using the concept of partnership, but the reality for the service user would be different, as would the skills required of the worker. Therefore, when reflecting on your approach you have to consider many of the words and concepts you use and relate them to what you actually do, rather than to some notion of what you think you do in practice.

Whilst we feel that reflecting on Howe's (1987) question about the individual and society is a helpful starting point in relation to reflecting on our approach, this demands closer examination. Social work practice takes place predominately with individuals who are part of wider social networks. While it is unhelpful to over individualise situations, so too is it to be over reliant on societal explanations. The following questions are designed to focus your thinking on the key elements of your approach to practice:

- What is the cause of service users' problems - are they personal or structural?
- What is more important, presenting or underlying problems?
- Is your task about helping service users to fit in or about challenging why they are marginalised?
- What is your role - to get things done or to enable those using the service to take more control of their situation?
- Is social work a technical/rational activity or is it based on dealing with uncertainty?
- Who is the expert in your relationship with the service user - you or the service user?
- What is your expertise based on - being a holder of knowledge and skills or being a facilitator?
- Are service users customers or citizens in relation to your work?

You may now want to go back and look at your answers in relation to the three approaches identified above, as these are some of the key areas that distinguish the uniqueness of the different approaches. In particular, they raise the issue of approach to practice, examining whether the worker's favoured approach is reflected in the reality of practice with service users. Often there can be a difference between our espoused position and the actual nature of the work in which we are engaged. This is aptly illustrated by our own experience within social work education. Our intended approach to teaching and learning is progressive, working from a democratic empowerment model. To do this we are aware that we have knowledge that we wish to share with our students and that they have both life and work experiences that can add to this process. Hence we need to find ways of bringing the two together. This requires a process to be developed which enables students to relate their experiences both to the formal learning environment and to future practice in a manner that is participative and interactive. All too often, however, we fall into a didactic way of teaching where we appear as the 'experts' lecturing the students, who appear relatively passive in the process.

Having attempted to create an empowering approach that is inclusive, we end up with a very different approach from the one that we intended; one which has the potential to be de-skilling and disempowering to students. We can find many reasons for this. It is easier, it is quicker, we are too busy - all are arguments raised by students about their approach when working with service users in an agency context. It is our view that these are rationalisations rather than reasons. We believe that the social work task should take no longer to complete from a progressive/empowering perspective than from a procedural one. Failure to implement our approach is often a result of our failure to reflect on our actions or to think through the implications of our espoused approach both for ourselves and for service users. Understanding and developing our approach is therefore fundamental to good practice as it underpins every other aspect from assessment through implementation to termination and evaluation.

PRACTICE THEORIES

When we consider our approach to practice, we are looking at what Coulshed and Orme (1998) term 'grand theories' that explain our understanding of social work as an activity and ultimately influence our work with service users in practice. However, workers also need to be able to utilise what we will term 'middle-level' theories that provide understanding and explanation at a much more direct level of application: that is, theories for practice (Payne 1997; Fook 2002). Workers are faced

with a plethora of these middle-level theories, some of which complement and some of which conflict with each other. The difficulty for the worker is that there is little consensus, particularly between the different approaches, about what constitutes acceptable theories for practice.

Coulshed and Orme (1998) suggest that to take the 'best' from the range of available theories is the predominant response at present within the practice setting. Whilst we would accept that selecting theory is a personal activity that can allow for considerable scope and flexibility, this will be constrained to some extent by the worker's approach, which will value some types of theory and knowledge over others. If, for example, the worker's approach to practice is individual pathology, he or she is likely to find psychodynamic theories such as attachment and loss helpful in terms of understanding individual service users. This may well be reinforced by the focus of practice within the agency. Whilst there is no definitive list of theories that workers require, the following provides a starting point from which to start thinking about those that underpin our practice.

Theories about society and how it works. This includes theories such as functionalism, conflict theories, feminism and racism. These are theories that add to our understanding about why people and groups behave and react in particular ways within society (Haralambos et al. 2004). Underpinning this are theories of power, who holds it and for what purpose. This should enable workers to start thinking about issues of oppression and strategies for challenging the inappropriate use of power or enabling those disadvantaged in our society to become more powerful (Braye and Preston-Shoot 1995; Dalrymple and Burke 1995).

Theories of poverty and disadvantage. This includes theories that enable workers to reflect on the pervasive impact of lack of resources and social exclusion, how difference is treated and the effects of stigma and alienation. This allows workers to consider strategies which do not blame the individual and which understand the multiple oppressions that race, gender and disability can add to the impact of poverty (Deacon 2002).

Theories of social policy and welfare. This includes theories about the welfare state and its role and purpose in order that workers can develop an understanding of both the organisational and policy context in which they operate and what this means for the services they provide for service users. These would include an appreciation of the importance of the statutory responsibilities of social work practice and how legislation and policy develop from political decision-making (Spicker 1995; Alcock et al. 2003).

Theories of the family and individual development. These enable workers to make sense of the individual stages of human growth and development that impact on the ability of individuals to cope with a range of different life tasks and how they are able to adopt a range of strategies to cope with their lives. In this respect, theories of the family which reflect diversity are important in order that workers can hold a diverse view of living and residing in a multicultural society (Burman 1994; Robinson 1995).

Theories of motivation and change. These look at areas such as organisational and personal change in order that we can reflect on appropriate ways of helping both ourselves and service users to take more control of situations. Such theories provide information about the range of strategies available to both workers and service users to change situations (Lewin 1987; Prochaska et al. 1992).

The purpose of understanding these middle-range theories is to develop an explanation of what is happening in the service user's world and to plan intervention on the basis of that insight.

Therefore, while formal theories should provide a starting point for possible understanding, they need to be incorporated into the service user's own views of the situation and the potential solutions. This point about the limitations of formal theories is made by many social work theorists who argue that they cannot fully explain or understand the world faced by workers and service users (Payne 1997; Parton and O'Byrne 2000; Fook 2002). Such formal theories rarely relate to precise situations, as they do not have the explanatory power to give direct guidance about specific situations for specific service users. Indeed, Parton and O'Byrne (2000) highlight that the danger of these formal theories is that they can be used to label service users, sometimes in a way that does not add anything beyond the ability to categorise and to increase the degree of scrutiny provided by the worker. Whilst the need to describe and categorise may be a legitimate concern for the worker, particularly in relation to statutory work such as child protection or probation, it is rarely the sole focus of the professional worker's task. What then becomes crucial for workers is that, as well as modifying and adapting formal theories, they reflect upon and evaluate their actions to develop their own practice theories. In effect, they are entering into the area of theory-building, which, if appropriate, can be shared with others (Fook 2002). Whilst this is a difficult activity that needs to be systematically structured, this is no reason for workers to avoid developing knowledge and understanding at the direct-practice level. Indeed, if they are to continue to develop their professional status, social work needs to articulate much more clearly its own practice theories rather than adopting wholesale those drawn from other academic disciplines.

The concern that formal theories have limitations in terms of practice should not unduly concern professional practitioners. Social work is not a science in the traditional sense, dealing with certainties and provable facts, but instead is concerned mainly with uncertainty, often around areas of feelings, reflections and opinions. Uncertainty about situations, their causes and potential resolutions is what marks social work as a unique professional activity (Parton and O'Byrne 2000). Consequently, social workers need to develop an understanding of the interrelationship between formal and direct-practice theories and their own experience of what works for them within their own approach. The key to good practice in this context is exploring what specific skill, knowledge or action was effective in enabling service users to make their own sense of that uncertainty and to find ways of making it more acceptable or manageable. This does not necessarily mean that positive change will always be the outcome. It may be about supporting people to live with situations that will not improve or may even get worse.

Failing to acknowledge this reality of uncertainty can lead to a formalised hierarchy of knowledge that places formal learning at the pinnacle, leaving learning from experience as much less valued.

Formal theories are a fundamental requirement for the worker in developing good practice. This book looks at methods of intervention in detail, as they can provide a useful way of helping our thinking and understanding and subsequently adding structure and purpose to our work. However, even in relation to methods, their use and applicability is open to challenge and interpretation, particularly when related directly to service users and their situations. This process of distilling formal theories through the filter of experiential learning and practice wisdom is an important means of developing practice theories which are both useful and relevant. In recent years this area has been given more credence by the work of people such as Schon (1987) and Parton and O'Byrne (2000). Our experience, however, is that it still requires considerable development and valuing by lecturers, practice teachers and workers themselves (Watson and West 2003).

KNOWLEDGE FOR PRACTICE

So far we have been concerned about how theories influence our practice. Not every situation, however, is new, requiring workers to construct their understanding of situations from the beginning. Over time, workers develop a knowledge base which reflects their understanding of the realities of social work and social work practice. Through experiences in practice; reflection on how they and others carry out their work; reading the experiences of others and studying research findings, workers develop their understanding of theories for practice. This builds into a knowledge base which can be drawn upon 'so that we are not reinventing the wheel every time we act' (Thompson 2000, p. 51). Knowledge in this respect is constantly developing and evolving to meet the changing needs of the practice context, providing a pool on which to draw and guide both understanding and actions. The knowledge base which workers require continues to expand and it is unrealistic to think that any one worker can possess all the knowledge that he or she is ever likely to need. What is important is that workers be aware of what knowledge they hold and how to find out what they may additionally require. There are, however, areas of knowledge which are important for workers to develop.

The first of these and the main focus of this chapter is the approach to practice. As we have previously discussed, knowledge of our approach becomes knowledge of ourselves and how we are practising. While we would not wish to suggest that workers need to subject themselves to a form of analysis, it is important that they should be attuned to their own contribution to relationships. The problem with self-knowledge, however, is that it is one of the most difficult forms of knowledge to be sure of and the one most liable to change, depending on circumstances. That said, it is key knowledge for workers, as it determines what are seen as the problems or issues and potentially determines the solutions.

The second area of knowledge which is important is what works, when, for whom and why. In essence, this is also a continuation of self-knowledge, as workers will also be drawing on their own experiences of what works for them. By developing an understanding of current research, workers are able to draw upon the collective wisdom of others rather than simply relying upon personal experience. This concern with 'what works' is an area of growing importance in the present managerial climate. Our concern, however, is that workers need to move beyond the tangible and easily identified also to evaluate what improves the lives of those they are working with and why. A good example of what we mean by this is provided by Bullock et al. (1998) who, by researching workers' and families' experiences, were able to identify what would be successful practice in the very difficult and complex task of children leaving care to return home. This is not to argue that all workers need to keep abreast of every twist and turn in practice and research, but it is a fundamental requirement to be aware of important developments and use this knowledge to enhance practice (Frost 2002).

The third area of knowledge that we consider crucial for workers in developing good practice is that of the agency, its decision-making structure, and policies and procedures. Social work as an organisational activity has in recent years become more proceduralised, with clear lines of accountability (Watson 2002). To continue to develop professional practice in this managerial climate, workers need to have knowledge of the organisation, how and why decisions are made and what is expected of them in given situations. In effect, they need to be aware of their role and function within the organisation and what this means for professional autonomy and discretion (Clegg 1990). It is only by understanding how the organisation functions both formally and informally that social workers are going to be able to get the best out of the organisation, rather than being controlled and limited in their actions. This may seem a strange statement to make, but knowledgeable workers in this area are not just managed by their organisation, but also manage the organisation. This can occur because whilst many of the procedures and decision-making structures tend to be concerned with rationing resources, particularly the workers' time, they are usually presented in more progressive terms such as good practice or partnership in any policy documentation (Postle 2002). Knowledgeable workers are able to use this understanding to advocate on their own and on the service users' behalf to obtain the resources or conditions to develop good practice.

As we shall explore in subsequent chapters, approaches to practice underpin all other aspects of the social work task. It is, therefore, vital that workers develop a clear, critical awareness of their chosen approach and how this in turn influences the process of assessment, the selection of method and the subsequent evaluation (see Figure).

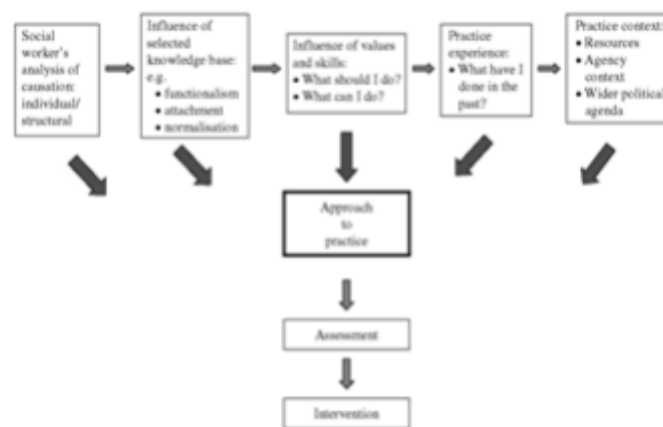


Figure 2.1 Developing an Approach to Social Work Practice

Social Work Practice Assessment: Purpose, Process and Approach

Assessment is at the heart of all good social work practice. It covers a spectrum of activities, from observation and judgments made within the context of an initial encounter through to more formal and complex frameworks of assessment. Its purpose is to enhance understanding of the service user's situation, helping workers to identify areas for potential change that will assist the development of a rationale for future intervention. In this respect, assessment and how it is carried out will be influenced by a number of factors, including who initiated the request, the nature of the prevailing concerns, the agency's policies and procedures and, last but not least, the worker's approach. This latter area will influence not only what is considered important in the service users' situation but also how they might contribute to the assessment process. Effective assessment needs workers to balance a number of competing and often conflicting demands in order that they obtain an understanding of service users and their situation.

Assessment is also a process that has a number of stages, which can arguably be identified even if they do not always occur in the logical manner (Lloyd and Taylor 1995; Coulshed and Orme 1998). The stages of assessment are:

- preparing for meeting the service user;
- meeting the service user to build a relationship and obtain relevant information;
- reflecting on and analysing the information gathered about the service user to determine the appropriate action to be followed;
- implementation of action.

Each of these stages raises issues and dilemmas for the worker to resolve in relation to completing their assessment. In relation to preparing for meeting the service user, this stage involves the worker having to determine what information needs to be gathered in relation to the service user prior to any meeting. Obvious sources of information include agency case files, other agencies' and professionals' records/reports and the often overlooked sources of relatives, friends and neighbours. In this situation, workers often need to decide how much information, if any, to utilise. This activity will directly impact on complex issues of confidentiality and empowerment on the workers' part, as they try to obtain a balance between preparing themselves for the assessment and pre-empting future actions on their and the service user's part. However, it is an issue that has to be addressed as, at a practical level, failure to obtain appropriate information could leave the worker entering particularly difficult circumstances without being adequately prepared. For example, not reviewing existing information might mean that the worker would not have considered from both his/her and the service user's perspectives the most appropriate place to meet. This could potentially put the worker at risk if the service user had been violent to social workers in the past. This is a real issue, given the growing number of recorded incidents of violence towards social workers in recent years (Spencer and Munch 2003).

From the service users' perspective, lack of consideration of previous contacts also mean that they have repeatedly to go over their situation to new workers, which can be stressful or cause unnecessary distress. Holding appropriate information means that workers do not have to pry into the service user's life but can confirm that they have an understanding of past events and work. However, too much information is also problematic, as it can lead to the worker forming a judgment about the service user solely based on others' experiences (Coulshed and Orme 1998). This can lead to confirming other workers' assessments, despite the changes that have occurred in the service user's situation in the meantime. What is required is for the worker to retain a healthy scepticism about others' information without losing sight of the possibilities and lessons it can afford. Obtaining this balance is something that comes with ongoing reflection and learning. As long as workers are able to reflect critically on how they have been influenced by external bias, then it is better to have too much information rather than too little until they have confidence in their assessment skills.

Meeting the service users entails consideration of from whom workers should seek information beyond the direct service user. All too often workers focus on the immediate service user, who, whilst important, may not hold all the relevant information on the situation being assessed. This occurs when an approach has been adopted that individualises problems, often to the detriment and disempowerment of the service user involved in the assessment. Good assessment entails gathering information from a variety of sources (including family, friends and other agencies) and checking out the currency and accuracy of such information by a process of cross-referencing in order to reach a valid conclusion. This raises questions about confidentiality and service users' permission to seek information about their circumstances.

Working in partnership would suggest that as far as possible these issues should be discussed with service users and their agreement sought. However, this may not always be possible if we are assessing situations where danger or harm may exist. Gathering information also means we have to consider what information is appropriate for this assessment and situation. Assessment is not about gathering every possible piece of information and then making a judgement, it is about obtaining relevant information (Scottish Office 1997). Service users, no matter who they are, have rights to their personal thoughts and feelings as well as their privacy, and workers must ensure that they do not abuse their position by violating such rights (Banks 2004). Good assessment means repeatedly questioning what information is needed in a situation and why. For example, information about John's past life was relevant because it helped us understand why he felt isolated and lonely. Determining the level of information required is a difficult balancing act for the worker to achieve. However, if we are to provide a service that is based around service users as partners, we need to work at it. In trying to achieve this balance, it is important that we should consider more than the presenting problem. For an appropriate assessment to be carried out, it is essential to consider all the factors relevant to the person's life, including thoughts and feelings.

Reflecting and analysing is a skilled activity that is best done with the service user, as it provides context and relevance to the information that is being assessed. The relevance of any assessment rests in the workers' (and service users') ability to sift and analyse the information that they have obtained, in order to make sense of the service users' situation and ensure that future intervention is appropriate to their needs and capabilities (Milner and O'Byrne 2002). This skill has increasingly been neglected in practice in recent years as social work has become more proceduralised and decisions about services and resources have become the preserve of first-line and middle managers (Dominelli and Hoogevelt 1996). Empowering practice is about more than gathering information for managers, it is also about workers making judgements around their understanding and knowledge, determining with the service user what is relevant and to what end - it is about making decisions. Therefore, assessment, if it is to be meaningful, requires workers to develop an analysis of the available information as a springboard for future action (O'Sullivan 1999). Parker and Bradley (2003, p. 39) provide a range of 'tools and diagrammatical aids' to assist with this process. They include the use of culturagrams that in the context of anti-oppressive practice are a more useful means of understanding complex family networks.

Action forms the final stage in the assessment process. This requires workers to draw up a plan of action and to evaluate its effectiveness. In reality this is not as precise an activity as one might imagine. Service users rarely follow a sequential process of assessment, providing information in the order that workers would desire. Life is rarely like that; people tell their story in their own unique way. This means that workers may have to take action before they have gathered or sifted all the information they would have desired. The implication of this is that workers invariably make assessments around partial information, including thoughts and feelings about a situation. Given the uncertainty that characterises these areas and processes, it is crucial that conclusions remain open to review and evaluation in the light of changing circumstances and information. None the less, this should not deter workers from being clear about their role and purpose and thereby providing a baseline for evaluation of the impact of any intervention. Professional social work requires appropriate assessments leading to effective interventions. It is only by doing this that an understanding can be developed of what works for and with service users rather than relying on folklore and intuition (Thompson 2000).

In recent years the importance of assessment has grown for both social workers and case workers as agencies have been increasingly faced with matching limited resources to what would appear limitless need. Consequently, agencies have had to find ways of making decisions about whether they should provide a service or not. In this respect, assessment has become a crucial tool in screening referrals for resources, including those of the social workers themselves. This can involve evaluating the referral against pre-existing eligibility criteria. On the assumption that the information gathered does enable a service to be provided, the function of the assessment should then be to develop an understanding about the best form of intervention to meet the needs of the service user. Assessment is about establishing the targets for and objectives of intervention, giving reasons for taking or not taking action and consequently providing a baseline for evaluating future practice. By asking basic questions such as:

what needs to be changed;
how this will be achieved, given the service users' capabilities; and
whether the worker/agency will be able to support the intervention,

workers should be able to describe what is going on, offer possible explanations and prescribe possible interventions. Therefore, whilst assessment may be an outcome in itself rather than part of a wider process, it is in many instances the beginning of the social work process with service users. Consequently, social work assessments need to be flexible enough to accommodate the unexpected, whilst structured enough to enable both service user and worker to understand what is being

undertaken and how it will be achieved. As Lloyd and Taylor (1995, p. 699) succinctly put it, 'social work assessment is not a static, once-and-for-all process whereby the worker arrives at the definitive "right" answer. Assessment is ongoing throughout the contact, and it is a dynamic process in which the worker, service user, agency (or agencies) and other interested parties are all involved and affect the outcome.'

Despite this awareness that assessment is an ongoing activity, the reality of practice for many workers is that it becomes a one-off event which is used to confirm our initial concerns throughout the period of intervention (Milner and O'Byrne 2002). This often occurs because ongoing assessment, by implication, requires critical reflection on practice and an ongoing review of actions that challenges the workers' own skills and understanding. However, failure to carry out this task means that workers may not utilise the growing level of understanding of service users as their relationship develops over time. It also fails to recognise that service users, because of their past experience or present knowledge of the social services, may have concerns or suspicions about information that they should pass on to the worker. This suspicion is understandable in terms of people rightly protecting their information, thoughts and feelings from strangers until such time as they have developed a degree of trust. Consequently, it would be unrealistic to expect service users to provide a full and total account of their lives to a stranger who is working from a position of authority. A more realistic stance would be to expect service users to give what information they feel is necessary to cover the present situation. This would suggest, therefore, that as the relationship develops between the worker and service user, more relevant information should potentially become available for consideration. This notion of relevant information being built up over time can be seen in relation to Brian's situation.

In terms of the social work process, assessment is usually the first stage in building a relationship between the service user and social worker/agency. This is true whether the assessment is to determine what ongoing support social workers can offer or is the initial stage of care management. First impressions and experiences are crucial, as they often shape and influence both workers' and service users' future responses (Milner and O'Byrne 2002). It is important, therefore, for workers to be able to use this experience in an empowering way that includes the service user and ensures that his/her needs are met in the most appropriate manner. Unless this occurs, workers may be failing to meet the service users' needs and wasting precious resources including their own and the service users' time. Worse still, they may disempower the service users to such an extent that any future intervention will be less liable to succeed, as they rightly feel that they have not been listened to and that their needs have been ignored. Consequently, good practice in assessment should be a partnership between the worker and service user, where those receiving the service are enabled to understand and be part of the process (Dalrymple and Burke 1995).

The changing nature of assessment in recent years away from need to risk is a cause for concern as it moves the aim of assessment away from a more holistic stance of the person and their situation to one particular aspect - risk (Parton 1996). Risk is important, but overemphasis on this one area means that workers are liable to fail to understand the service users' situation and may inappropriately target resources. It also has the potential to shift the focus of assessment away from what can be done - building on the positive - to what should be avoided - emphasising the negative. What is required is a balance between these activities, reflecting who the service users really are and what they are capable of doing to change their lives. This has come under challenge within the present managerial ethos, impacting upon and influencing social work. Assessment is increasingly being seen as a mechanistic, technical activity that can be broken down into discrete tasks carried out by unqualified staff (Watson 2002). Whilst assessment is not the sole preserve of the qualified worker, good assessment is a skilled activity that requires appropriate training and understanding if it is to be carried out effectively. Whilst assessments may be routine, there is no guarantee of this being the case and, in our view, agencies should be using their most skilled staff in this area, ensuring that service users needs are fully assessed and agencies can appropriately prioritise resources.

ASSESSMENT: RISK AND PARTNERSHIP

In recent years the process of assessment has become increasingly more difficult and skilled, particularly as a result of government and professional expectations around two key areas: risk and partnership. Defining risk in relation to social work practice has obtained increasing currency. As Kelly (1996) points out, one of the reasons for this is that workers often have to work with people of whom they have little knowledge at the time of intervention. This situation means that, even with the best available information, the worker is liable to be limited in his/her ability to determine the best possible action. The aim of risk assessment in this context is to enable workers to gauge the potential danger and then to take remedial action if they are concerned about the potential consequences. In relation to the assessment process, risk has generated a plethora of assessment frameworks and checklists which, if completed, are believed to indicate the level of risk (DoH 2000; McIvor et al. 2001). Parton (1996), however, cautions against this notion of implying certainty, arguing that risk assessment is part of a move towards targeting groups and, in particular, those who are affected by poverty or oppression. In this respect he suggests that risk assessment may not necessarily be a positive activity, given its limited predictive potential. In essence, risk-assessment frameworks may give the illusion of being scientific and objective, but as yet they fall far short of this as the indicators are at best limited in their predictability.

Risk and need are not the same thing and what this means for service allocation is that many service users, despite their needs, may not obtain a service in modern social work with its resource limitations. This has led Lloyd and Taylor (1995) to conclude that while risk assessment should be a component of the process it is not to be the sole focus of the assessment, which should be a balance between concerns, strengths, risks, needs, rights and resources. Counter to this is the view that risk assessment provides a framework to make concerns explicit in relation to a particular situation, thereby enabling open and

transparent discussion about what is of concern and how this can be managed. To this end social work has increasingly moved into the area of interdisciplinary work and shared assessment (Bradley and Manthorpe 2000).

To undertake a risk assessment implies that we have some notion of what risk itself is and what this means for the situation. Whilst there is much debate about the concept, Brearley's (1982) definition, despite its limitations, continues to be relevant by providing a working framework for moving forward. He suggests that risk is the possibility of a present or future event involving possible negative outcomes, usually associated with loss, damage or harm. In effect, risk assessment becomes a decision based round uncertainty and unpredictability that is calculated in relation to the given knowledge that the worker and service user are able to bring forward at that point in time. However, risk is more than just the possibility that loss, damage or harm may occur. It also has to be considered in relation to the possible consequences of that event. Therefore, not all risky situations will be concerning to workers.

Given the plethora of frameworks for assessing risk, Brearley's (1982) work is still helpful because it identifies and provides a framework for assessing risk that can be debated and discussed between practitioner, service user and agency. This framework makes the distinction between general predictive hazards and situational hazards, identifying that not all factors are of equal importance in terms of risk. General predictive hazards are usually linked to background factors that have been important in a person's life and may be indicative but are not prescriptive. Any attempt totally to eliminate the risk would need those background hazards to be remedied. In the short term, however, workers may only be able to seek out ways of minimising or securing protection around these areas of risk. Situational hazards tend to be those in the present environment that are causing concern and are those that workers may seek to minimise or alleviate. Brearley's framework also offers a starting point from which to develop ways of reviewing and thinking about risk itself. He argues that when assessing risk factors in any situation, workers should not concentrate solely on the hazards but should also value the strengths that the service user and the worker can bring to any situation as a means of minimising the potential dangers. This framework is in essence rather like a SWOT analysis where Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats can be examined as axes on a grid, diagrammatically presenting relevant information. It promotes thinking about what would be the anticipated outcome, given the strengths and potential opportunities of the service user, while acknowledging the threats and concerns in relation to a situation. Assessing risk requires a realistic appraisal of what change is possible, which situational hazards can be worked with and when the background hazards can be addressed. In these situations it might well be that the worker's role will change from being one of a change agent to someone who is clearly monitoring or controlling the situation. While for many workers this may not be the most comfortable situation, it is likely to be their role in a risk-assessment situation. Finally, Parton (1985) makes a crucial point that the price of having risky people in the community is eternal vigilance. What this implies is that risk assessment is something that cannot just be done on an occasional ad hoc reactive basis but needs to be a proactive, planned activity that is constantly clear about its aims and goals.

Frameworks for risk assessment are still at an early stage of development. Concerns have been expressed about the potential for models of assessment to be utilised that imply a degree of expertise which they do not merit in practice (Beaumont 1999). However, the claim that it is scientific and requires the skills of an expert has tended to mean that service users have been excluded from the process. Risk assessment, however, has the potential to be used within a more democratic model of assessment where concerns and consequences are openly discussed with service users, who are able to make informed choices about their lives.

The process of assessment has also been influenced in recent years by the emerging importance of the concept of partnership. Whilst this is not a new concept, what is now different is the growing importance, in government guidance and legislation, of partnership with service users (Smale et al. 1993). The problem with this guidance is that partnership is rarely defined and can therefore be interpreted in a variety of ways. Of concern is that working in partnership can become a practice that workers utilise at the minimal level of informing rather than working directly with service users. Partnership as Dalrymple and Burke (1995, p. 64) point out is more than informing. It is about the 'notion that service users and providers should be included as far as possible as fellow citizens in the decision-making process that affects their lives'. What partnership does not mean is that the worker and service user are equal in terms of their relationship. It is doubtful, given the structural difference and power differentials between the worker and service user, that this level of equality could ever occur.

The purpose of partnership is as far as possible to remove artificial barriers to the relationship with those using the service. It should be an attempt to transform the power held by service users in order that they can take more control over their lives. This moves the focus of the service from being provider-led to service-user-led. Partnership is about a process of working that enables service users to have the knowledge and confidence to take more control over the issues effecting and affecting their situation. It is about trying to enable them to become more powerful. This is a negotiated and evolving process.

Transforming power requires two vital ingredients according to Braye and Preston-Shoot (1995): sufficient information to understand and take part, and the ability to influence decisions. Unless these are achieved, it is about consultation or participation rather than partnership. To achieve partnership, workers will need to give consideration in both the assessment and implementation processes to how they can enable service users to become more confident. Workers need to assist service users to develop their skills and help to remove any barriers in the decision-making processes. As Healy (2000) points out, partnership may be about the big issues of organisational decision-making, but it is also about the everyday actions as workers. A practical example of this in relation to assessment is provided by Thompson (2000, p. 137) who states that partnership is about the workers setting out their stall: 'Making it clear at the beginning of our involvement why we are there, what our role is, what we expect of them, what they can expect from us and so on.' It is in this context that partnership can be

most real, but is also significantly underutilised, as workers hold on to their power at the expense of the service user.

Arguably, the concepts of risk and partnership, which are an integral part of the assessment process, are conflicting rather than complementary in their effect. Risk tends to move power and expertise into the workers' or agencies' domain. Partnership moves power away from these sources towards the service user. Our contention is that they need not be conflicting, but that workers and agencies may find it less threatening to give emphasis to risk rather than to develop an approach based on partnership. Whilst as concepts these are continually evolving, risk has obtained greater applicability in practice as it tends not to challenge workers and indeed may serve to protect them from external pressures. Partnership, on the other hand, can be threatening as service users become more powerful and may challenge not only the system but also the worker. What is required is not that we ignore risk, but rather that we begin to locate it in an open framework that enables service users to be part of the process of assessment. Whilst this may be problematic, better decisions about risk will be made as a result. In this context, risk and partnership can become complementary, leading to risk assessments that are both informed by and determined by service-user involvement. This is likely to move risk assessment away from a negative activity to one that has the potential to empower service users.

How Models of Assessment Influence Approach

Assessment is not a technical, value-free or mechanistic activity that can be rigidly followed. It is an activity that will be influenced by both the service users' situation and the workers' approach. In particular, the workers' approach and the relative importance they give to activities such as risk and partnership will influence what they perceive as important and how they go about gathering information. In relation to this latter area, how we gather information, Smale et al. (1993) identify three different models of assessment. These are the questioning, procedural and exchange models, all of which approach the assessment process in different ways.

The questioning model is based on workers using set questions to gather information from 'passive' service users. The worker assumes the role of the expert who is able to interpret and define the data in relation to the service users' needs. In many respects this model fits the traditional expert model of professionalism in that the person who holds the power is the worker who has the ability to define the service users' problems. According to Smale et al. (1993), this model is probably most relevant for workers in relation to risk assessment. It is a model that limits and restricts the involvement of the service user and should therefore, in terms of an empowering approach to practice, have limited application. That is not to say that workers do not need to gather information, but that the gathering of information is not the sole purpose of the social work assessment or intervention.

The procedural model is based around completing guidelines or checklists to establish whether service users fit agency criteria for services. The expert in this model is the person who has designed the forms, the worker's role being to gather information from service users. Smale et al. (1993) believe there is a tendency for this model to be used in community care assessments, as they are subject to resource constraints. While this may or may not be true, it is clear that the procedural model has a number of strengths and limitations. Workers do have to gather information for agency purposes and, as a consequence, require both factual and subjective information to complete resource applications. However, the danger with this procedural model, as with the questioning model, is that the basic social-work value of respecting persons and their thoughts and feelings can become secondary to the information-gathering process. This can particularly be the case if workers adopt an indiscriminate approach to gathering information from service users. In doing this, they are then able to claim that they have covered all the bases in relation to issues such as risk.

The exchange model is based on the premise that service users are experts in their own lives and situations. Consequently, the relationship between the worker and the service user should be one where the worker enables the service user to identify strengths and resources as well as weaknesses and limitations. This enables and empowers service users to take more control over the assessment process and how they will be involved in the resolution of any difficulties and dilemmas. The model is not about ignoring the issues of power and empowerment, but about having these transparent and explicit in relation to the service user in order that they can make decisions effectively and influence their own lives.

What these models do is raise the question of how workers are approaching the assessment process. It is our contention that although the questioning and procedural models will fit with the managerial agenda, they are not as consistent with an empowering agenda that is based on partnership. Our concern is that too many assessments fall into the questioning or procedural models, with workers only gathering information as this fits an agenda of getting the job done, often under severe resource constraints. This practice is often justified as being a practical response to large workloads. This can lead to the marginalisation of service users where promoting their contribution to the assessment process is seen as time-consuming. The concern tacitly held by workers utilising such models appears to be that working in partnership will alter the balance of power in the relationship, thereby changing the workers' ability to maintain control over their workload. Whilst gathering information is a key part of assessment, how this is done should reflect the needs and capabilities not just of the worker but also of the service user. It is our contention that ethical assessment - based on exchange - is arguably no more time-consuming than questioning and procedural models, but may be more skilled and challenging to carry out. The difference between the models is based not on additional work but on the level of honesty and openness employed by the worker. The implication of being open is that workers may have to face questions about their values and how consistent these are with an empowering anti-oppressive practice. In this context Dalrymple and Burke (1995, p. 120) provide a framework that can inform good practice in the area of

assessment:

- 1 Assessment should involve those being assessed.
- 2 Openness and honesty should permeate the process.
- 3 Assessment should involve the sharing of values and concerns.
- 4 There should be acknowledgement of the structural context of the process.
- 5 The process should be about questioning the basis of the reason for proposed action and all those involved should consider alternative courses of action.
- 6 Assessment should incorporate the different perspectives of the people involved.

When considering assessment from an empowering anti-oppressive perspective, it is a much more complex process than the simple asking of questions designed to obtain formulaic answers. It is a skilled activity that requires reflective practice to ensure that empowering relationships are at the heart of the process (Lloyd and Taylor 1995).

Assessment Skills: Communication, Negotiation and Decision-Making

To carry out an assessment that is accurate and empowering, workers need to develop a range of skills. The skills of communication, negotiation and decision-making are central to this process as they lay the basis of relating to, working alongside and agreeing the appropriate direction. Effective communication is required in order to help put people at ease, gather information and enable and empower service users to feel part of the social work process (Lishman 1994; Thompson 2002). Therefore, failure to communicate effectively can all too often lead to service users being confused about what is expected of them or failing to understand the reason for social work intervention. Consequently, to work in partnership and empower service users it is important to communicate with them in a way that those using the service can understand and can build upon. This is of paramount importance when assessing and working with service users from ethnic minorities, who, according to Thompson (1997), need to be listened to very carefully to ensure that we do not impose our own interpretation on their communication. This is equally true in relation to areas such as gender, class, age and disability, all of which can impact on the type and style of communication which we use and deem appropriate.

Communication is an area of social work practice that has obtained considerable attention in recent years and is covered in most textbooks. On reviewing the literature there are a number of areas of communication that can and do influence the social work relationship. These are:

verbal
non-verbal
paraverbal
written

When we consider these areas we are not just thinking of the worker, but also of the service user's contribution to the relationship. Communication between workers and service users, therefore, does not take place in a vacuum. It has a purpose, which in terms of assessment is to gather information to come to a conclusion about what needs to be done, if anything. What this means is that both parties will enter that relationship with preconceptions and agendas that will influence how and what is communicated, both verbally and non-verbally. What workers need to be aware of is that for many service users this will be a traumatic or anxiety-provoking experience that may impact on their contribution and way of communicating. It is important, therefore, that workers enable service users to feel that they are respected and that their contribution is valued early on in the relationship, thereby enabling them to get past the concerns they have about social work involvement and to move on to actively engaging, observing and listening to what is happening in the interview setting. 'Active listening', as described by Lishman (1994), is a special alertness on the part of the listener, where the aim is to listen closely to the details of the service user.

Verbal communication, as Thompson (2002, p. 87) points out, 'has two elements: what is said and what is heard - the output and the input'. In relation to what is said, workers should set the tone for interview by being clear about their purpose and what they expect from the service user during the meeting, reassuring them that their contribution will be valued. To do this needs workers to ask and answer questions, and engage with and listen to what the service user has to say. Lishman (1994) identifies the key skills in this activity as questioning, reflecting, focusing, summarising, confronting and challenging. These are used to obtain appropriate facts and feeling from the service users and to enable them to develop issues or their understanding of the situation. This is a difficult skill for students and new workers to acquire as it involves a continual judgement about what is appropriate to do at any given point in time, each choice having the potential to stifle as well as to enhance communication.

Too many questions, for example, can give the service user the feeling of being put on the spot; too few questions may mean the interview can drift into an unstructured conversation. Inappropriate confrontation or challenging, particularly early on in the interview, can be perceived as aggressive or hostile; too little challenging means issues may only be seen at face value as they have not been explored in depth (Lishman 1994). The key to this activity and ensuring that it is an empowering

experience is to give as much time to the service users' agenda as to your own. They should be the main focus of the interview and this is not possible if the bulk of the talking is done by the worker rather than by the service user. This is where active listening becomes important. Service users should be aware that workers have appropriately heard and acknowledged what they have said, and have reflected on their statements to ensure that their interpretation of events is confirmed and understood. This verbal communication is a difficult skill which the worker can only build up over time using both critical reflection and supervision.

Communication is not just confined to the spoken word. Non-verbal and paraverbal communication are also important. Non-verbal communication is contained in our posture, gestures, expressions and actions. Paraverbal communication could be described as the short vocal interjections that help maintain the flow of a conversation. The 'uh uh', 'hmm' or short sigh can signify far more than many sentences! A misplaced sigh or inappropriate gesture can complicate the dynamics of that first encounter. These activities can give clues and cues to what people are feeling during the interview. Workers should be looking to consider how consistent these actions are with the verbal in order to help them to think of how they should respond. A simple example could be in relation to a person who is physically displaying his or her discomfort about a situation, but is saying that he or she has dealt with this issue. In this situation the worker might wish to reflect on this fact in order that the issue might be more fully explored.

The problem with such communication is that it is more open to misinterpretation than verbal communication, as we draw the wrong conclusions from what we observe. This is much more probable when working with service users from diverse backgrounds, where different customs and practices are liable to pertain. There are also some concerns about the use of such forms of communication in terms of child protection investigations where 'coaching' of children is perceived to occur when they provide responses that are thought to be required by the adults concerned (Clyde 1992). Finally non-verbal and paraverbal communication is a two-way process, as service users will also use this tool to assess whether workers are interested in their situation or are going through the motions. In this respect we would like to stress the importance of workers keeping to appointments and the times set. Failure to do this gives an all-too-clear message to service users that they are not as valued or important as the worker, providing the basis for a relationship that has from the outset disempowered the service user.

Written communication is the last area we would like to consider. Whilst this tends to reflect the outcome of meetings between service users and workers, such communications are also important in terms of that relationship. Written communication is mainly required by employers and other agencies to reflect the worker's assessment of the service user's situation (Thompson 2002). As such it needs to be written in an appropriate style for that context. However, reports can also be part of a growing practice of sharing our conclusions with service users and checking out their understanding of what has occurred and what will occur. Two key areas stand out in this activity: what we know (facts) and what we believe (opinions). Failure to draw out these distinctions on what are often permanent records can be confusing and labelling to those using the service (Thompson 2002), often leading to subsequent workers obtaining an opinion that is based on supposition rather than fact. Written records also need to be written with clarity and in a manner that makes them accessible to service users, avoiding jargon wherever possible. What becomes apparent in even the simplest of interactions with service users is that these are activities and processes where effective communication is of vital importance.

If communication is a skill that is well covered in social work texts, then the following areas of negotiation and decision-making have received less attention. In terms of negotiation this is in part because empowerment and partnership are relatively new concepts for workers, who are still working out how to apply them to practice. Historically most social work approaches would have been based on the worker or agency holding expertise and defining the solution if not the problem. This was not done alongside the service user, but done to them by either passive agreement or imposition. Partnership, on the other hand, implies that we are looking if not for agreement at least for some understanding or acceptance of what is to be achieved. This is a goal that requires all parties to be heard in relation to both the causes of the situation and possible solutions. By implication, partnership implies that all parties are able to make a contribution to this process. In essence it should be a process that empowers service users by valuing their unique contribution.

Negotiation, however, is an activity that is also based on what is possible, something that will be influenced by the statutory and agency context, the workers' skills and abilities, and the service users' willingness and ability to be part of the process. It is not about giving people what they want, but finding a solution acceptable to all parties with the intention of making change real and possible. In essence it implies that all parties are willing to compromise in order to achieve a workable consensus. This is a task that is more difficult for some social work approaches than others. In particular the individual pathology and procedural approaches, with their reliance on worker expertise, can be problematic. Workers holding these approaches will have to review their own power and acknowledge the expertise that the service user has to contribute to the process of assessment and intervention. Negotiation is a social work skill that is not just confined to the relationship between the service user and worker. It is also required if the worker or care manager is involved with other agencies or trying to obtain resources within his/her own organisation.

Negotiation from an empowering perspective is based on seeking out the commonalities rather than emphasising the differences between perspectives (Thompson 2000). All parties need to be open about their purpose and intentions and what they seek to achieve. It is also important that empowering practitioners seek to ensure that service users are provided with the support they may require in order to be genuine participants in the process. In order to be an effective partner in any negotiation, each side needs to have a clear understanding of their own situation, the areas where there is the potential for compromise and those areas that they regard as non-negotiable. Negotiation is part and parcel of any approach that claims to work in partnership

with service users, as it brings them into the heart of the social work process by acknowledging and valuing what they can expect to receive and contribute to their situation.

Despite the move towards partnership and its attendant skill of negotiation, workers will still have to make decisions about who to involve, the relevance of information, courses of action to take, etc. Whilst these can and are shared across the agency and multidisciplinary setting, a key feature of social work is the activity of decision-making. It is an area that in child care and criminal justice has in recent years come under increasing scrutiny owing to the high-profile mistakes made by a small number of workers and agencies. However, whilst social work is characterised by high-profile and potentially contentious decisions, it is also an activity where workers on a daily basis make decisions that impact on service users and their lives. It is only recently, with the work of Terence O'Sullivan (1999), that this important area - decision-making - has been given increased attention. O'Sullivan stresses the need to counterbalance the increasing number of procedures and checklists which, whilst meant to enhance our decision-making, have increasingly bureaucratized the process. O'Sullivan (1999, p. XI) instead provides a framework to help us consider what should influence our decision-making activities. He sees this as a 'supporting structure of grouped ideas and concepts and ideas placed in relation to each other with the purpose of providing a map that social workers can use to order their minds and act with purpose and clarity in the situations they face'.

This framework is required because, in making decisions, workers are rarely working with information that provides certainty. In fact, they are often called upon to make decision quickly against a background of uncertainty, partial information, scarcity of resources and with service users who are using the service unwillingly. In this context there is no guarantee about the choices that are made and there is the potential for public retribution if the wrong decision is made. O'Sullivan, whilst not providing definitive answers, suggests a process that should enable more considered decision-making and, hopefully, effective outcomes. Whilst what will be an appropriate decision is open to debate, O'Sullivan (1999, p. 16) provides the following framework for making decisions. Decision makers should have:

been critically aware of and taken into account the decision-making contexts;
involved the client to the highest feasible level;
been clear in their thinking and aware of their emotions;
produced a well-reasoned frame of the decision situation that is consistent with the available information; and
based their course of action on a systematic appraisal of the options.

Whilst O' Sullivan fully explains each of these concepts, it is worth elaborating on two of these so that the framework becomes clearer. In terms of context, we are taking into consideration factors such as the aim of intervention, agency and legal context as well as the service user's situation. Workers do not operate independently and any decision has to be considered with this in mind. The second issue is that decisions are not technical activities but can also be influenced by our thoughts and feelings about a situation. They will also be influenced by our past experience of similar situations, which will influence when we will act. In essence our experiences will influence the threshold/level at which we become concerned about a situation. Hence the worker's concern and threshold of action in relation to truancy would be much higher.

This issue of different thresholds of concern for workers has been studied by Dalgleish (2000), who identified marked differences in decision-making amongst child and family social workers, despite having the same information. The worker's threshold of concern will also influence the decision that is made. There is a need, therefore, for our threshold to be openly reflected upon and examined in supervision for more consistent decisions to be made. Finally we would like to reiterate O'Sullivan's commitment to involving service users in the situation. Whilst we believe that this is good practice, it should also lead to more effective practice. However, there is no guarantee of this as workers with the most effective communication and negotiation skills, who have fully reflected on their choices, are still making a judgement; they are providing an assessment of the situation. What is important is that this should be done in an empowering manner that is open to challenge and evaluation by the service user, the agency and, in a growing number of circumstances, the wider public.

SUMMARY

Assessment is a process that requires workers constantly to evaluate new information against their understanding of the situation. It is about more than determining if a resource should be provided; it is also about developing an understanding and basis for present and future intervention. The workers' approach has real and significant implications for the involvement of service users in the assessment process and what information is considered important. It influences whether partnership is about informing service users or about giving them a say over the decisions that impact on their lives and what model of assessment is applied in any given situation. The process of assessment has increasingly been influenced by factors such as risk and partnership. This has shifted the focus of assessment from need to risk. What risk and partnership highlight is that assessment is a subjective activity that requires workers to be honest and open about the purpose and process of their assessment. Whilst all social work intervention is based on assessment, ethical assessment is an activity based around a host of skills, including effective communication, sound negotiating skills and effective decision-making. Many of these skills may be at an early stage of development, which means that their application is often a problematic activity.

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. 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. 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 managerial system.

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.

Effective practice requires workers to develop a conscious awareness of their approach. The worker's orientation to the task will draw upon a number of aspects including an understanding of society and how it works; an awareness of wider political issues; personal and professional values; current knowledge base and organisational and cultural aspects of the agency. There are three broad categories of approach to practice: procedural, individual pathology and progressive. Each has its own unique response to service users and will in turn affect the processes of assessment, implementation, termination and evaluation. Developing an approach to practice assists workers to develop a clear sense of their own professional persona and the skills they require in order to be effective. In this context, theory for practice is as important as understanding grand and middle-range theories. It will be influenced by the worker's approach, an awareness of what is effective and a clear understanding of the organisational context in which the work occurs.

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