

Developing a practice framework

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Abstract

This paper will outline the key elements of my professional identity, giving the reader a portrait of how I will operate as a social welfare worker. My practice framework includes a discussion of the values of social justice, accountability, transparency and congruence which I feel strongly about. Included is an evaluation of postmodernism, systems theory and anti-oppressive theories, three theories which have best informed my practice, and how these theories were revised, modified or confirmed (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003:217). Issues such as the influence of the medical model in welfare work and the use of principles similar to those used during the time of the stolen generation posed a challenge to my practice on placement. I have discovered my professional identity is shaped by my belief that change is possible and can occur. I have identified closely with critical social work practice and a reflective approach.

Introduction

Discussing an entire practice framework in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. I have included some salient aspects of my practice framework which will guide my future practice. Only after completing a practice framework can I see how each of the parts are internally consistent. The values I feel strongly about reflect the key elements of my professional identity. Formal theories which inform my practice share commonalities with tensions in practice. What is presented in the following framework is a blue print for future welfare work. Although this reflects common welfare themes and feelings as expressed in ethical guidelines and handbooks I feel it is individual to me because I experienced these theories, practices, values and attitudes in action. Most paradigms of practice were originally presented to me in a theoretical sense and now I feel I have gained a practical knowledge of these by being on placement and involvement in social welfare work.

Practice Framework

Values I feel most strongly about

Values are the cornerstone for moral and ethical action in social work. Values guide and influence our choices, decisions, our relationships with clients and understanding of situations. Values penetrate all aspects of welfare work including key areas such as policy and research (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003:234; Dominelli 2002:15). Thinking and revisiting our values is pivotal to good social work because, as social psychology studies have revealed, our values and attitudes guide our behaviour more when we think about them (Myers 2005:139).

Accountability is a value I feel strongly about because being accountable as a social welfare worker is a component of being anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive. As a welfare worker I will be working in the public arena and therefore my work will directly or indirectly affect the wider community. Accountability is valuable because

it is linked to broader social and moral accountability (Banks 2002:29). As a worker I can engage with supervision to 'practice' accountability (Banks 2002:34). Accountability is closely linked to transparency and transparency to congruence, all of which are important to providing an ethical framework for practice.

Another value I feel most strongly about is often stated in social welfare ethics and codes. Social justice is a difficult concept to define for it is widely debated (Commission on Social Justice 2000:53). and yet a very important value which I feel all social welfare workers should evaluate and determine its part in their practice. Social justice is so significant in the field of social work because it typifies what the majority of social work is based on (Clark 2002:38). My understanding of social justice is that it is simply a concept and what is important about it are the actions which follow. Social justice implies the notion of equality and therefore social justice is about reducing or eradicating inequalities wherever possible. Social justice also involves the fulfilment of basic needs for each citizen. Social justice is about creating opportunities for equality and entitlement. A socially just world would mean each individual was of equal worth (Commission on Social Justice 2000:62).

As a social welfare worker I can work towards social justice by being an advocate for equal distribution of resources: getting involved with social policy and politics to influence others who have power to make a difference. To promote social justice it is important to remember that an individual's civil and political rights should be an adjunct to (but no more important than) social, economic and cultural rights. As a social welfare worker I can work towards changing structures which maintain inequality and injustice (Australian Association of Social Workers 2002:8). This infers social welfare practice requires 'top down' work to obtain social justice, that is, work which challenges power structures that maintain inequality (Popple 2002:152). The policies and structures created by those in power affect and control the powerless and need to be deconstructed to achieve equality. Critical social work is something I identify with and has become part of my professional identity.

Key elements of my professional identity

I identify myself as a critical social welfare worker because I engage with reflection and criticality. I feel I can identify with critical social work because of the notion that change is crucial to critical practice. My goal for my time on placement was to assist with a change or experience change in a client's life. I was determined to see this happen because I have had doubts about the possibility of change. I was somewhat disappointed when progressing through placement and not seeing change at least over a short time. Gradually as placement went along I realised that change is gradual rather than abrupt. I recognised this after being with a worker who was very elated about a client's actions which just seemed to me to be everyday normal behaviour. The worker had observed the change in this client as a significant and important milestone towards sustained change. I began to see value in the very mundane things which were changes in themselves and reassured myself that change was possible. Certainly coming to the realisation that change is possible has been only one of the challenges I faced during placement.

Issues which challenged practice during placement: Points of tension

The Victorian Children, Youth and Families Act (2005) contain a set of “Best Interest Principles” as part of section ten. The Best Interest Principles are used widely throughout child protection practice, therefore, becoming familiar with and also adopting them was crucial to the development of effective practice on placement. Their use in my practice was originally very challenging. My issue with the Principles originates from the research and study in relation to Indigenous Australians I have engaged with while at university. My initial wariness of the Best Interest Principles was the connection it held to past ideas and actions which were viewed as in the ‘best interests’ of the child which led to the maltreatment of Indigenous children and families. The principle of ‘best interests’ in the past contributed to the destruction of Indigenous people in a multitude of ways (Miller 2007:4). Because of the involvement in events such as the stolen generation, social work practice has been subject to accusations of devaluing Indigenous culture. It has also been implied that in the past, social work engaged in imposing white western ideology in practice (Briskman 2007:12), although, as I have learnt, social work is a developing profession and modern social work today is a product of past responses to needs (Johnson 1995:19-20). Overcoming negative feelings about the Best Interest Principles involved finding where the Principles have built upon and acknowledged the past. There is recognition of the historical context of the Best Interest Principles and true advancement made from past mistakes is acknowledged through the collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups to create a new framework for child protection practice.

Early social work practice has been influenced greatly by the medical model. The process of engagement still used today, albeit in an evolved form, was originally shaped by the medical model (Johnson 1995:22). Early child protection work in Victoria was based on the medical model which saw the cause of child abuse as the parental psychopathology (Miller 2007:6). Others argue the medical model was disregarded from social work as early as the 1950s (Johnson 1995:26) Martin (2003:18) states since the settlement movement social work has shifted back and forth between structural explanations and individual explanations based on the medical model, and continues to do so. Traditional approaches to social work are generally more associated with the medical model and the individualisation of problems, while critical social work evolved from Marxist theory which proposes structural explanations for social problems (Martin 2003:24). Adopting a critical and structural approach to social welfare work has helped me to challenge the notions of individual pathology brought about by the medical model.

Integrating theory and practice

Integrating theory and practice has been about applying wider concepts to particular situations. Developing praxis has involved greater reflection and the recollections of experiences as well as identifying where theory appears to have been operating within these situations (O’Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003:217). Evaluating the links between my personal plans and what actually occurred was an important step in seeing how theory relates to practice. Finally I used, as Fook (1996:2) suggests, critical incident reflection to integrate theory and practice. Critical incident reflection required me to reflect on critical events which I felt were important to my development as a social welfare worker. Using reflection has been my primary

method; it has proved to be an important asset when integrating theory and practice (Fook 1996:2).

Using the adaptation of Bogo and Vayda's Integration of Theory and Practice Loop (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003:218) I begin by retrieving the event. On placement I participated in visits to many families with violent males as a partner or husband. With one particular interaction I had with a female client who was in a violent relationship I noticed a resistant and defensive reaction. The client defended the violent actions of her partner and resisted any suggestions the violence was significant enough to change her life. Workers reinforced that the actions of her partner were affecting herself and her children in a multitude of ways, some of which are not immediately noticeable.

Reflecting on the effectiveness of work done and identifying values and attitudes is the next stage to integrating theory and practice according to the loop (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003:218). Workers were able to effectively increase the client's interaction and encouraged her to question her partner's actions through open questioning and providing information about violence and its effects on her and her family members. The worker portrayed values of transparency through informing the client of things which one normally might avoid discussing in a casual conversation. The worker also challenged any comments by the client that suggested the violence was acceptable.

Stage three of the Integration of Theory and Practice Loop (Cleak & Wilson 2007:94) involves conceptualising the event in theoretical terms and therefore it is a step away from the specifics of the situation and will require me to look into theories, research and professional perspectives to explain the situation. I would argue the female client's reaction could be explained as 'acceptance mode' of an oppressive situation (Dominelli 2002:11). Anti-oppressive theory suggests people react to oppression in three ways: acceptance, accommodation and rejection (Dominelli 2002:11). I believe the client was in an acceptance mode because of her original deep denial in and refusal to believe the violence was harmful to her family. This demonstrated to me embeddedness in the situation (Dominelli 2002:11). Choosing a theoretical option for action is the final step to linking theory and practice (Cleak and Wilson 2007:94), in this case anti-oppressive theory would be a specific option to try. Working to break down oppression with a client who is experiencing acceptance of oppression involves revealing and helping the client to see how oppression operates and how it is continued through their interactions (Dominelli 2002:13).

As part of developing praxis I 'tested' my own theories as well as the wider theories which I have learnt throughout university. I will explain how these theories were revised, modified or confirmed in the following section (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003:217).

Theories which best inform my practice

Whether we are truly in a period of postmodernity or we are still lingering in the period of modernity it is hard to deny society across the globe has experienced changes due to globalisation (Cohen & Kennedy 2000:58; Scholte 2005:4). In a world with increasing interconnectedness and increasing cultural interactions (Cohen &

Kennedy 2000:26) postmodernism seems to hold some validity. Postmodernism and social work share an uneasy relationship (see Trainor 2002; Pease & Fook 1999) and at first I felt there was very little room for postmodern ideas in social welfare practice. In many instances postmodernism appeared to be uprooting all the main ideas of traditional and critical social work (Trainor 2002:207). Howe (1994:513) suggests social work is a 'child' of modernity, much of what social work represents was formed during this period. Although, in some aspects, modern social work practices run parallel with postmodernist and post-structural notions (Howe 1994:523). Postmodernism shares a commitment to being constantly critical, de-centred, self-reflexive, as does social work. It is the conflicting and challenging views of postmodernism that offers social work a reason and grounds for reflection on action (O'Brien & Penna 1998:186). I understand how important reflection is to good social welfare practice, and postmodern theories are important because they encourage me to be constantly scrutinising my actions and choices and I feel this will help me to maintain a good standard of practice.

When interacting with clients I felt a consciousness of the postmodern idea that we each construct our own realities. I had to take account of my own interpretations of the client's story (Pease 2002:8). Pease (2002:8) suggests postmodernism can, in this sense, be more empowering as it motivates workers' accept accountability for their own interpretations as these will always be different to another person's interpretation according to postmodernism. Postmodern theories have allowed me to reconceptualise power and empowerment (an integral skill in social work) and therefore shape my use of it in practice to best empower clients (Pease 2002:2). Power, according to postmodernism, is the product of discourses and is not possessed but exercised. Conceptualising power in this manner gives hope to powerless groups who have the possibility to exercise power even if they are unable to possess it (Healy 2005:203). Postmodernism enabled me to make sense of some ambiguous situations while on placement. It was terribly confusing when I would go from being a powerful person in my role with clients and then being a powerless junior worker with other more powerful workers. I would imagine some parents may feel powerful and in control with their children when together as a family and then very powerless and vulnerable when the family unit is separated. Postmodernism explains competing discourses are responsible for multiple identities, our identity may be conflicting and segmented and this is because discourses shape our identity in each context (Healy 2005:200-201). I do, however, agree with some feminist criticisms of postmodernism that fixed identities and collective identities are important in achieving progressive social movements (Healy 2005:202).

Systems theory is a socially focused theory which attempts to explain connections between families and groups (Payne 2005:142-143). Systems perspectives inform my practice partially because my personal theories are shaped by my family relationships. In systems theory the family is viewed as an interrelated unit consisting of members who influence each other through interactions and relationships (Compton & Galaway 1999:29). I understood the concept of families in systems theory more comprehensively on placement when I received a phone call from a client's mother. The client's mother was wishing to find out the organisation's plan for her daughter's family in order that she could organise her long trip down to visit the family. The client's mother soon grew frustrated at the organisation's inability to give definitive

answers. She explained to me she did not normally act like that but was under stress after hearing her daughter's children were in foster care. Kaplan (as cited in Compton & Galaway 1999:29) makes an interesting analogy of a family system and a tuning fork which goes "When you strike one end, the other end reverberates". The client's mother was feeling the effects of the family system being disrupted at the other end. I learnt a valuable lesson that families are interrelated and as a social welfare worker one should be prepared, when taking on one client, to interact and consider how actions with the individual have a wider effect on the family as a whole. The effect that changes had to the other side of the family showed me that the wider family can be a source of strength when they are part of the operating whole. I came to conclusions such as these through reflection, which has certainly been a strong point to my practice.

Strengths of practice

I gained confidence and strength from exercising a reflective approach to any work I did while on placement. Our personal theories always seem to be the most apparent in our lives and formal theories, in my experience, are generally harder to adapt to everyday situations. Fook (1996:6) argues a reflective approach is highly regarded as it facilitates workers' paralleling practice with formal theory. Effectively, being reflective has assisted me to 'join the dots', that is, link formal theory, research and practice. I believe a strength of my practice was my ability to inquire and criticise my actions in order to change and assume accountability (Fook 1996:5). At first I would find myself reflecting after (positive and negative) events and eventually I would reflect before, during and after events. I found the more I thought about my actions and proposed actions the more I could control them to better reflect my values and theories. Achievement of goals proved more successful if I was reflective at all stages.

Conclusion

I will conclude by mentioning practising social welfare on placement has given me the missing piece to the theoretical puzzle. Through the process of reflection on action and reflection in action (O'Connor, Wilson & Setterlund 2003:217) I have pieced together a logically connected practice framework. I have discovered where postmodernism and social work connect and how I can use postmodern ideas to benefit practice. I have experienced systems theory in action and felt firsthand how welfare work has broader impacts on family systems. A constant critical view of my values, attitudes and theories is important in ensuring my actions are consistent with these. The most meaningful aspect of my journey has been the move to the belief that change is able to be attained and sustained in social welfare practice. For me, without the possibility of change social welfare practice would be in vain.

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