Perspectives on social work:

Individual stories

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Individual stories: perspectives on social work

Contents

Introduction

In this series of four interviews you will watch a service user, a carer, a social worker and a social work manager talking about their different experiences. The interviews will illustrate the importance of listening to people's stories, the importance of relationship in social work practice, and the importance of the context in which social work practice takes place. You will consider questions about the interviews, and will reflect on the implications for practice of what the individuals have to say.

While these video interviews can be used as stand-alone resources, they also support the free online courses An introduction to social work, in which you can read more about working with individuals and the importance of biography, and
An introduction to social work in Wales, in which you will learn about the importance of the Welsh context and its impact on social work in Wales.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- think about the impact of biography on personal lives.
- consider the role of relationship in social work practice.
- consider the importance of context in social work practice.

Video interviews

Allow 45 minutes As you watch the videos, jot down the different life experiences of the speakers. When you have watched the videos, answer the questions below.

Siân Parry - Service user

Video content is not available in this format.

Mr Howell Mudd - Carer

Video content is not available in this format.

Mags Thomas - Social worker

Video content is not available in this format.

Linda Jones - Social work manager

Video content is not available in this format.

What life events or turning points impacted on the lives of the individuals in the videos?

Make some notes on your own life and about your current situation. What life events or turning points have had an impact on you and the decisions and choices you have made?

1. What do you understand from the interviews about the importance of relationship in social work practice? (Listen in particular to the social worker talking about using her personality.) What do you think the carer means when he says there's something missing between himself and the social worker who doesn't speak Welsh?

2. What do the individuals in the videos suggest are the qualities necessary for good social work practice? What are the similarities and differences between the qualities identified by the various individuals?

3. What impact has social work intervention had on the life of the service user? The carer? Why is it important that social workers have an understanding of the nation in which they are working and the language needs of the people they work with?

4. What did you learn most from watching the interviews that you think would be important for social work practice?

Discussion

This is a very personal, but nonetheless valuable activity. There are a number of cultural and other differences in individuals' biographical experiences which variously influence their present lives and attitudes, and it is it is important that we acknowledge and value such diversity.

People go into social work for all sorts of reasons: to do good; to help others; because of their own family background or experiences of loss, illness or disability; to confront their own problems, or simply by chance.

A 2011 survey of students undertaking social work training found that people were influenced by both personal and career factors when choosing to study social work. Motives included those associated with the following elements:

1. Altruism – a desire to make a difference, help others and fight injustice.
2. The personal qualities and experience of the student – an ability to get on with people, work in a team and, for some, a suitable career choice because of their own life experiences.
3. Career factors – such as a well-paid job with career prospects and flexibility.
4. The day-to-day nature of the work – variety, high job satisfaction and having individual responsibility.

(Based on Stevens et al., 2012)

As illustrated by both social workers in the videos, making the link between personal experience and what social workers bring to their practice is an important early step towards their becoming a reflective practitioner.

Good social work practice is primarily about relationships (Wilson et al., 2011) and engaging effectively with service users, carers and others to enable them to tell their stories. Forming a good relationship is the starting point for working 'with rather than on people' (Beresford, 2012). It is through the professional relationship that social workers 'engage with and intervene in the complexity of an individual's internal and external worlds' (ibid), and this is illustrated by Mags (a social worker) in the video, as she relates how she used her personality (her 'self') to establish relationships with young people in a half-way house.

However, forming a good relationship becomes more difficult when service users' needs within this relationship are not met, as in the case of Mr Mudd (a carer). Being allocated a social worker who did not speak Welsh made it more difficult for him to engage with her as he would have wished, as he had to 'think in Welsh and speak in English'. Although speaking in English per se is not problematic for him, the relationship would have been an easier one had it in been established in Welsh. This is echoed in Siân's (a service user) interview - Welsh is, after all, the language in which she lives her life. The introduction of the 'active offer' principle (CCW, 2014), requires that in future the identification of language need in Wales will become the responsibility of the professional rather than the service user or carer (who may already be in a position of low status and power, and therefore may not feel able to exercise their right to request a Welsh medium service),

Off camera, Mr Mudd suggested that providing care, while physically and emotionally demanding, may be missed by the carer when the person who is being cared for requires additional support and moves into residential care. The gap left by the absence of that person and the removal of the role of 'carer' can be difficult. So it is important to

acknowledge that while social work intervention may change some aspects of peoples' lives for the better, the consequences of intervention can also mean that life might now be quite different for all concerned.

Conclusion

The qualities or characteristics of a good social worker identified by the four individuals are broadly similar. The importance of listening, and the other qualities mentioned, reflect the 'warmth, empathy, reliability and respect' identified by Beresford (2012) as being what service users want from social workers – that is, the same kind of qualities one would expect in a trusted friend.

References

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