THE PENDULUM SWINGS (BACK); RELATIONSHIP BASED SOCIAL WORK IN ENGLAND, THEN AND NOW

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Abstract

This paper is a reflective discussion of how relationship based approaches to social work, from psychoanalytical to systemic, have shifted in and out of favour in England, in line with moves to legitimise, professionalise, give credibility and identity to social work. I set the context with Clare Winnicott and her introduction of the first recognised social work course in England, then go onto discuss after a period of stability, how new theoretical models, and serious case reviews have reshaped social work practice and education over time. I end by presenting current relationship based models underpinned by systemic practice and suggest this should be both the theoretical approach to teaching social work and the delivery of social work practice to provide a relational, pedagogical teaching approach.

Key words: profession, psychoanalytical, relational, relationship based social work, social work, systemic practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Relationship based practice is more than just using relationship skills in social work; I suggest the nature of the relationship is central to the potential for learning and change between the service user and social worker, similarly, for the educator and social work student. Sadd (2012) notes three theoretical frameworks: psychoanalytical, attachment and systems theory underpin relationship based practice. She argues within relationship based practice there is an emergence of knowledge between self with others. As such, the use of self in the relationship is essential. Ward suggests “The term ‘self’ is often used as shorthand for a whole set of aspects of personality and identity, including our beliefs and values, our anxieties and ‘constructs’ - a combination of our rational and intuitive views on the way the world and other people operate, and therefore how we interact with the world and other people” (2010: 52).

Based on the relationship based model of teaching social workers, (Edwards and Richards, 2002) the use of self by social work educators would include empathy, engagement and empowerment of students. Edwards and Richards position themselves within the systemic approach to teaching from a relationship based model and argue that “While relational psychoanalytical theories are attuned to the importance of relationships, in these models the goal of psychological development remains individualistic” (2002: 36). They suggest that development, learning and change is not individualistic, but rather happens between people, in relation to each other. I have chosen to situate my teaching of social work students from a relationship based approach underpinned by a systemic framework. I understand systemic to mean ‘the connectedness of people, things and ideas: everything connects to everything else’, Campbell (2000) cited in Barge (2006). This involves all people within the relationship; i.e. social worker and service user or social work educator and social work student.

However, social work practice in England has not always supported relationship based approaches from either a psychoanalytical, attachment or systemic underpinning. As noted by Trevithick, “social work tends to shift ground on key issues, often in response to the demands of its critics and government” (2003: 165). Indeed it was the Home Office inquiry (1945) following the death of Denis O’Neil, a 12 year old evacuee, killed by his foster carer; which led Clare Winnicott to develop the first national Child Care Course. The course, influenced by her knowledge of attachment and psychoanalytical theories ran for eleven years from 1947 and was the first attempt in social work to create what could be recognised as an educationally communicable technique, (Flexner 1915). It was
taken over by courses that provided a generic qualification to work with either children or adults, however the relationship based psychoanalytical influence remained.

2. THE RISE AND DECLINE OF PSYCHOANALYTICAL BASED RELATIONSHIP PRACTICE

Howe (1998) argues a strong tradition of psychoanalytically informed practice remained until the 1970’s. Pearson, Treseder and Yelloly (1988) suggest British social work was rooted in a tradition of democratic socialism, which enabled a psychoanalytic model to dominate. Whereas Payne (1992) suggests rather than the psychoanalytical model itself, social work was dominated by psychoanalytical ideas such as attachment and loss. Howe notes

“In social work, the strength of relationship based approaches has tended to rise and fall with the changes in the fortune associated with the profession’s following knowledge generators; 1) clinical, frontline and field work practitioners, 2) researchers, 3) theoreticians and 4) policy makers, administrators and managers” (1998:47).

Howe believes the psychoanalytic model existed in social work for over thirty years until “analytic case work tradition came under fierce attack from three very different sources: scientific behaviourists, Marxist sociologist and public enquires run by lawyers” (1998:47). Behaviourist approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Treatment and Behaviour Modification provided alternatives techniques to address what was seen as individual problems. During the same period, Howe suggests the public inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (1973) resulted in inquiry recommendations to change much of the focus of social work education from the need to understand people, to the need to understand systems, procedures and statutes. However, alongside this, England witnessed a new wave of Radical social work that embraced Marxist ideology and a belief that traditional social work practice served to pathologise individuals. Radical social workers perceived the problems which affected individuals as socially constructed and saw their role as raising consciousness to empower people and communities (Berger and Neuhaus 1976, Gutierrez and Ortega, 1991, Solomon 1976). That said, the relationship based model of teaching presented by Edwards and Richards (2002), although much less radical also incorporates empowerment and consciousness raising. This era of radical social work and the need to understand systems may have contributed to the dilution of the appreciation of relationship based approaches. The expansion of social work courses in England being developed from a variety of sources, (Davis 2008) unlike the single source of Clare Winnicotts programme, may have further contributed to a lack of understanding of relationship based approaches, even when they were attempted to be delivered. Trevithick captures what she feels contributed to the downfall of the relationship based approach when she states

“It is clear that during the 1970’s and 1980’s - and since – some practitioners fell into the deceptive and perilous trap of thinking that forming and maintaining good relationships, sometimes called relationship building, was an end in itself, rather than a practice approach that provides a foundation to build future work” (2003: 166).

Brown (1996: 12) suggests a number of models that were introduced and applied in social work at this time including problem solving, crisis intervention and task centred approaches. The impact of these theoretical and situational changes that Brown, Howe and Trevithick present all combined to undermine the credibility of relationship based social work and undermine the professionalism in social work overall. Anti- oppressive and anti-discrimination practice then appeared in the social work arena following the public inquiries into the deaths in 1984 of Jasmine Beckford (London Borough of Brent, 1985) and Tyra Henry, (London Borough of Lambeth, 1987) children from Afro-Caribbean heritage. The inquiry into Tyra Henry found gaps in the knowledge base of social workers to inform their practice. Brown suggests when there is a lack of knowledge of social work practice, social workers tend to use selective knowledge to reinforce decisions they make based on their belief or value system, which has the potential to lead to discriminatory practice, (1996: 8).
3. CHANGES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION OVER TIME

The identified lack of knowledge, values and skills in social work led the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW, 1989) to create a new qualification in social work; the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) from September 1991. It was intended to teach students core knowledge, values and skills, competence in assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation of outcomes. In the same year the Children Act 1989 was implemented, the first major piece of legislation relating to the role social workers needed in the care and protection of children, which created a greater sense of professionalism and legislative accountability. When I qualified in 1992, it was the last time social work training programmes were delivered under the qualification of the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW) awarded by CCETSW. On reflection, qualifying during this transition phase from CQSW to DipSW provided me with the knowledge of a new approach to relationship based social work influenced by the emergence of systemic practice, as well as me gaining knowledge of various short term interventions such as task and crisis centred models and individual based models such as cognitive behavioural therapy. Essentially, during this transition phase my experience epitomised a period of “eclecticism” in social work. Payne (1991) cited in Brown suggests clients could “benefit from all the available knowledge so theoretical perspectives should not be limited” (1996:11). On the contrary, I witnessed this “Flirtation with different developing ideas” (Brown, 1996: 13) as serving to further undermine the professional identity in social work. Social workers often referred to working with an eclectic tool box of interventions, but were unable to say what theoretical model they were using or why. This seemed counter to the aim of the DipSW, which was to provide core knowledge required in social work. The objective was never quite realized and within three years of the introduction of the first DipSW, a revised DipSW (1995) was introduced; it was felt a significant reduction in the emphasis of anti-discriminatory practice was needed. The new focus was intended to prepare students to “anticipate and respond to future changes in need, policy and service delivery” (CCESW, 1995:3). This started a period of case management style of social work assessing need/risk and commissioning service provision in response. This style of social work conflicted with my interest to work with families throughout their journey of change. I decided to leave social work but remained aware of the serious case reviews that continued to question the decision making of social workers and the profession as a whole, particularly that inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003). The introduction of the Children Act 2004, and registration of social workers with the General Social Care Council in 2004 (SOLACE 2004), followed as a consequence of recommendations from the inquiry into her death. This was a critical stage in social work; in addition to the introduction of new legislation and professional process, during this four year period (2000-2004) there was a further change to social work education. The DipSW was replaced by a BA in social work implemented in the academic year 2003/4. The rationale for the change came at a time when there was a decline in the number of people applying to train as social workers and the perception of the professionalism of qualified social workers was at an all time low (Department of Health, 2008). The reforms were intended to produce a qualification that “rigorously assessed graduates” including in respect of an “ability to function effectively and confidently in multi-disciplinary and multi agency teams” (Department of Health, 2003:1, cited in Department of Health 2008). Despite criticisms that the DipSW, a two year programme, was competence based (Dominelli 1996, Ford and Hayes 1996), the additional year required to undertake the BA in Social Work was not designed for more academic study, but for additional days in work based placements (Department of Health 2002, cited in Department of Health 2008). The focus on multi agency work was a further new addition that was also reflected in the new Children Act 2004. Despite decades of changes to social work practice and education by this point, social work continued to struggle to find a distinctive professional identity sustained over a period of time in a way that was evident during the period of the psychoanalytic relationship based approach.
4. RECLAIMING RELATIONSHIP BASED SOCIAL WORK

It was the Serious Case Review of Peter Connelly (Laming 2009) which led the then Government to request another national reform of social work education in England (The Social Work Task Force, 2009, The Social Work Reform Board 2010, The College of Social Work, 2011). It also led to a series of reviews of Child Protection Systems, (Munro 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). One outcome was that The College of Social Work, (TCSW), introduced the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) which formed the basis for the selection and assessments of students and the design and delivery of the new curriculum for social work degree programmes. Guidance from TCSW, the Health and Care Professions Council, HCPC (2012) and the Munro reviews all emphasised a need for social workers to be able to build and sustain relationships with service users and professionals, with Munro calling for a return to traditional style relationship based approaches to social work. However, a “return” implies going back to something that previously existed. These reviews were conducted in the context a social work profession that had lost a coherence of identity amidst an array of social work theory, legislation, and a raised threshold of complexity and need from the service users. What was called for was a robust relationship based approach that could be taught to social workers which they could deliver effectively to resist further change and provide a period of stability within the profession. However, 2014 saw a number of events that would leave social work practitioners and educators to question if stability would ever be achieved. A new style of social work programme, Frontline, was introduced as a project pilot for graduates with a good first degree (2.1 or above). It involves a five week intensive summer university training programme followed by two years in a statutory child protection team where the lecturer would go to the participants and teach them seminar style at their place of work. By the end of the first year the participant is awarded a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work and they can work towards a Masters Degree in Social Work during the second year. Two reports on social work education were also published in 2014. The Croisdale-Appleby and Narey reports both provided different and at times conflicting advice on further social work reform. I felt a sense of unsafe certainty (Mason 1993) that even with the Munro, TCSW and HCPC recommendations, that the call for a return to a relationship based approach to social work, could fall on deaf ears. I had returned to social work management where I noticed a change to what Munro (2011:86) noted as ‘the emphasis has been on the conscious, cognitive elements of the task of working with children and families, on collecting information, and making plans.’ I observed social workers writing reports about children, who had spent more time with support workers or family centre staff than the social worker themselves. Shotter (1999, 2011) refers to this as ‘about-ness’ writing; a retrospective monological style, as opposed to ‘with-ness’ writing where the practitioner is writing from a perspective where they know the child and can write using a prospective relational style. I continued to be struck by the term ‘Direct work with children’, which was introduced during my absence from social work. I felt direct work appeared to be something conducted by ‘others’; support workers, specialist teams or agencies, while the allocated social worker had the least contact with children. Statham, Cameron and Mooney (2006) found that direct work with service users accounted for between a quarter and a third of social workers time. Hingley and Mandin (2007:181) suggest ‘We refer the angry or sad service user to the expert therapist or to another agency for a specialist service instead of attempting to engage him or her ourselves’. These were not necessarily angry or sad children; just children being raised in difficult or complex environments but it appeared that social worker no longer had the skills to develop a relationship with the children and work with them themselves. Ruch, Turney and Ward (2010) suggest that for social workers to adopt a relationship-based approach in contemporary social work, they need to be trained to do so. I then became a senior lecturer in social work; and sought guidance from documentation by TCSW and the HCPC Standards of Education and Training (2012b). I found both sets of guidance informed me on what social workers need to learn but not how they should be taught. I decided to teach from a relationship based approach, matching the relationship based social work the students should use when they begin practice, (Walker 2014).
5. THE PLACE FOR A RELATIONSHIP BASED APPROACH AS WE LOOK TO THE FUTURE

What social work in England needs as we look to the future is a consistent theoretical model in social work education and practice. Thus far, education in social work focuses on the curriculum content but is absent in advising on a theoretical approach to teaching. As the importance of relationships in social work practice has been recognised, this recognition needs to be extended to social work education policy and guidance. The systemic focus to the relationship based approach acknowledges the impact of context on the relationship (Pearce and Pearce, 2000, Pearce 2006, Pearce 2007) and Edwards and Richards (2002) model emphasises the use of self through engagement, empathy and empowerment which was ironically one of the social work theories that contributed to the unpopularity of the psychoanalytical approach. When the pendulum swings, it is impossible for it to swing back to where it first was; the context, time, knowledge and experience change and develop while the pendulum is in motion. Policy and legislation also change while the pendulum swings; while writing this paper it was announced that the government are to close TCSW, one of the authoritative bodies which suggested the need for social workers to know how to build relationships and was also responsible for providing guidance on the content and design of social work programmes (TCSW, 2015). It is too soon to say what the implications will be for relationship based practice and the social work profession in general following the closure of TCSW. However, undoubtedly it will add another period of instability, uncertainty and change.

6. CONCLUSION

History has taught us a number of things that threaten the potential for a single theoretical model to be threaded through social work education, practice, management and policy. Firstly, the social work profession in England is under constant scrutiny and criticism often from both outside the profession and within, undermining the potential for a professional identity. Secondly, history has taught us that since the 1970’s there has not been a sustained period where a consistent theoretical approach to social work education and practice is has been evident. One issue being the position taken by government to make sweeping reforms following highly publicised serious case reviews. Thirdly, history has also taught us that these changes have not always been made from a sound base of knowledge or evidence – often what social work practice is said to be lacking. An approach has to be rooted and sustained over a significant period of time to bestow social work education, practice and policy with a recognisable theoretical underpinning, providing a professional identity; otherwise, the profession will remain tenuous in its identity and reputation. It remains to be seen if this single approach proves to be relationship based.
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