

Second Giving Poverty a Voice Social Worker Training Programme

Study Group Wednesday 11 June 2014

What is social work for? Social work in an 'ideal world'

We are asking this question because ultimately we want to change the social work paradigm. So this will be a touch-base question as we go through the study groups, as a means to refine our vision.

Providing support: Social work should be about responding supportively to social problems and ensuring positive outcomes for all members of the family where possible. Children should only be taken into care where there is abuse or neglect. Where there are circumstances of poverty or learning difficulties, families should be supported. If abuse or neglect is identified families need to be helped to prevent further harm with the children remaining at home if possible (e.g. supporting women in situations of domestic violence or preventing further neglect)

Positivity and encouragement: Families should be praised and positively reinforced when they do things well, and empowering families to actually be able to protect themselves and their children. For example, case conferences should begin with outlining the family's positive achievements (as is done in Lewisham with the Strengthening Families policy).

Social work training: The education of social workers would underline that social workers have a role in fighting injustice (which might include challenging colleagues or other professionals). A more equal degree of respect would be given to real life human experience vis-à-vis theoretical and textbook knowledge. Social workers should also be supported to talk about their experiences, their communication styles and the language they use.

Preventative: In an ideal world, support and prevention are key; if the family is at breaking point, then the problem has already gone too far. Ideally people would not be scared to ask for help early on.

Family-focused and valuing the 'social': Ideal social work would place family and community at the centre, rather than being individualistic or child-centric. It would consider people as members of their community and would collaborate with people already involved in the lives of families (whether these people are other practitioners, or members of the community that the family trusts). Furthermore the experiences and situations of families would be considered in its context rather than individuals being blamed for supposed lifestyle choices.

Building relationships and time: Social work is not a technical job or rooted in paperwork, but is based around relationships with colleagues and people you work with. In an ideal world, social workers would have far more time to build relationships and trust. 10 minutes at a time with a family is not enough, not even ½ an hour is sufficient.

In an ideal world,
what would social
work look like?

Protection: Social work involves the protection of vulnerable people (for example, children or adults with mental illness). Nevertheless, the imperative of 'protection' would avoid going so far as to create an overly 'risk-averse' climate.

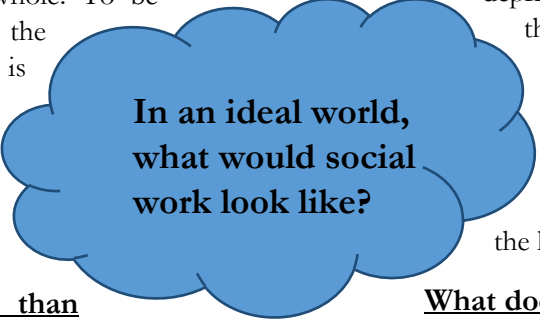
Change/positive impact: Social work should aim to bring about positive change in people's lives and in the community as a whole. To be effective in this, social work practices must have regard to the particular individuals and communities with which it is concerned and tailor itself accordingly. Social work should be involved in identifying the causes within a community for social deprivation and the needs to rise of out this. Social work practice should strive to do no harm.

Social work should be purpose-driven rather than process-driven: Ideal social work would focus on building relationships and strengthening families and less focus on arbitrary targets and tick the box exercises.

Acknowledge power relations: Social work exists to support, protect and bring about change. However, it inevitably involves a power that social workers have over service-users (for example, to remove people from their families). Ideally social workers would understand that this power exists and is a real issue and would attempt to mitigate it by ensuring families

understand why they are doing the things they are doing (such as checking cupboards or a child's bedroom).

Social work should be for everyone: Social work is for everyone. It is about assisting the community to elevate itself from deprivation. Whilst it may be aimed at the deprived in any given community, in assisting those deprived persons to elevate themselves, the impact is upon the whole community. By helping just one member of the community the whole community is changed positively. Social work is therefore for all of us without exception. Accordingly, social work ought to be based on equality – no one section of the community should be given preference over another section of the community to the latter's detriment.



**In an ideal world,
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What does an ideal social worker look like?: An ideal social worker would be empathetic, patient, approachable, have a desire to help, be open to understanding people's backgrounds and the realities people suffer and be non-judgmental. Furthermore, ideally social work would include at least some non-professionals, those that have experience of going through the system themselves as service users and those who have a child or who have been in care themselves.

Poverty and Material Deprivation Examples

Food

"There have been times in the supermarket when my daughter and I have walked around with a calculator to buy the cheapest food and note down what we could afford."

"Having to live on a budget all the time. Can't buy good quality food and having to resort to cheap process food, which lead to poor health. Feeling ashamed to rely on food banks and charities, some child feel embarrassed because their parents have to use low end supermarkets, afraid they will be a target for

School

"Poverty is living day to day and making ends meet. The money you have is not enough to provide for your kids. My daughter was bullied at school for her clothes and not having the right fashions; she stopped attending school and I was threatened with prison. I don't like borrowing from family and friends so I asked for help from social services. Then a social worker came around, checked my cupboards and made me feel I had done the wrong thing by asking for help."

"I think about the education system and how kids feel the differences between them. There are expectations of having

Clothing and personal grooming

"My son's school phoned social services because my son's trousers were too short in the leg after a growth spurt. We didn't have the money to buy new clothes. That is what material deprivation means to me."

"For black people their hair can be hard to manage and some black parents may not know how to deal with it and need to attend a hair salon, but of course if you don't have money it may

Needing to be resourceful or being put in unfavourable situations to raise money:

"A lot of people use pawnbrokers or loan sharks. I have lost a fair bit of jewellery in pawn shops. Even though I haven't used a loan shark, I have used pay-day loans and money lending shops which has put me in debt to this day. But I had to use them in order to survive. Some people in poverty make the desperate decision to sell their bodies to put food on the table, sad to say. When you don't have any money you learn to be resourceful, you're always thinking how to get a little cash like making two meals out of 1, mending shoes or recycling stuff out of skips or bin. Sometimes I see people rummaging through the bins for scrap metal. A few children buy items such as sweets, stickers or go to restaurants to get condiments and sauces and sale them on at school for extra cash, I think that must be a huge burden for the children as they must feel responsible. People living in poverty may try to earn extra cash by doing extra jobs and that could be putting up a shelf or selling your old tat at a boot sale etc. It isn't nice living like this; I don't want to be rich but I don't want to worry about the next loaf of bread."

Housing: *"You can't afford a mortgage to secure some type of future for your children, so may feel like a failure."*

Social expectations, feeling the need to fit in

"Growing up in the 50s, lots of people were poor but the social expectations today are so high that the pressures and the shame are all the greater. My neighbour's flat is spotless but undecorated; she has this 60 minute makeover illusion and she is ashamed about it. We are left feeling we are not good enough."

"When people talk nowadays about teenage parents, there is often criticism of parents buying fashion for babies and having no money for anything else. But they know that there is a hierarchy of parenthood, that parents buy things for their children to avoid other stigma. We can argue that it is a wrong priority to buy such items but there are reasons behind it. I think social workers have to recognise the context of public discourse and how people are blamed for their choices when they have no real choices. There is a lot of blame bandied about."

"I remember a local housing association saying publicly that housing benefit was about to change and that people should stop spending money on cigarettes, alcohol and sky tv. It is just prejudice."

"Social services came to assess our family. Our daughter was wetting the bed at the time, the sheets were being cleaned and yet the question was why we had not re-made her bed."

"Can't afford the finer things in life, take the children on holiday, buy fancy clothes, which might lead to bullying which could then lead to suicidal thoughts or stealing. People may have to resort into buy cheaply from "off the back of a lorry", causing people to engage in criminal activities."

Links between Social Work and Material Deprivation

When was a family's material deprivation addressed in social work? Do you have any examples of when there was a mis-/understanding about a family's deprivation and what could have been/was done? How can social workers be made more aware about material deprivation?

Activists and Parent Advocates: It is important when social workers do help to buy material items. This is the part of the social work people want. It is possible to accept material support when the conditions are right.

Academics: Child neglect (the leading reason for children being put on the child protection register) needs to be understood within the context of material deprivation. Yet the issue of child neglect is often not talked about within this context; professional or public discussions about child neglect systematically fail to consider the issue of poverty. For example, the national strategy of Action for Children for addressing neglect does not mention poverty once. Research at Coventry University has shown very clearly that the numbers of children in care varies considerably across different postcodes.

Home visits are the arena where social workers enter into a situation of material deprivation. Without an adequate understanding of the reality of poverty, the assessments made about the family or quality of parenting during a home visit may be subjective and inflected by middle class presumptions or prejudice. Incorrect assumptions due to a failure to truly understand what it means to live in poverty can be seen in other areas too, for example, judgments/prejudiced statements being made about why individuals living in poverty spend their money on certain things (cigarettes, television) and why they choose to have children when they are on a low budget. Social workers should constantly ask themselves or the families they work with how a low budget can impact upon one's life. Case notes should capture the whole context, not just bare facts.

Practitioners: Current strategies for engaging with families and how families are treated when they ask for material support need to be assessed. It seems that at times we can be overly restrictive or assume that families don't know how to budget (when in reality their income is so low that the idea of better budgeting is unfair). However, we need to ask how material support deals with the underlying situation? Is that the role of social work? It is not just about giving people money, but also the skills to problem solve. Bailing people out sometimes is necessary, but it's also about how we help families to be able to make things better for themselves. We should refer families to other social services before they get to crisis point. Furthermore, social capital and social networks are important. How can we help families to build up these support networks?

Appendices – Personal examples from group discussions about social work and material deprivation

Activists and Parent Advocates

“One of the social workers I had, I had a great relationship with. She gave us all the things we needed, money for food etc. She came around but never went through my cupboards. She only came to see if there were any problems.”

“I had a case conference, there was a husband and wife with 4 children. The man had said, I’m leaving you. The house got repossessed. She was getting depressed. The house was a mess. The kids were dressed shabbily. Mother basically wasn’t coping. Social services came to do a report etc. It went to case conference, but by the time they got to case conference, the social worker took the time to help with the house – clean and repaint. That was the only family I’ve done in the whole year that didn’t go on the child protection register. So that was because the social worker went that extra mile. It helped the mother out a lot emotionally.”

“I had a good experience too. I needed new beds. The child with ADHD smashed everything up. I was referred to charities to get new things. It was really good. Basic things like a bed can be really important.”

“A young mum on our estate I was helping, her husband left her and owed money to other people. They broke in – took everything in the house. Stuff that wasn’t gone had been smashed. She was terrified because she had the social worker coming two days later. The guy who came to see her wasn’t her usual social worker. She explained the situation to him and he said ‘if he came back would you take him back?’ and she said ‘no way’. Then she asked if they could help her in any way to get her new furniture. He said, ‘we are not allowed at the moment because your children are not at risk. You don’t meet the threshold for an intervention. But these are people I know from family associations, local Salvation Army.’ He went back to his office and typed up a letter of reference for her and brought it back that evening. Within a week she had replacements of everything. The Salvation Army were amazing. Even Hackney Home Store, normally you have to pay before they will deliver, but they made agreements with her to pay £5 a week. But the fact was that this social worker did go back to the office, did get the letter and dropped it off on his way home. When he was getting ready to leave I said I was surprised by this service and he said in the past few years they have had a lot of retraining and it’s much more family focused. He chatted with her a few days later and said he noticed that she said she wanted to study and that if she wanted any help with that, that he could see if he could help.”

“I have three positive examples. One of the positives wasn’t to do with case conference because at the time when they were first involved, they didn’t do case conferences. Housing benefits had messed up with the forms, we were supposed to be getting help with the rent. We got made homeless. We went out to the council. They said there was nothing they could do, ‘you have made yourself homeless’. So I got moved with the two boys to Portsmouth on my own, without Thomas, for over a month, before we got into BnBs. When I went to Portsmouth I didn’t know anybody. I was in a room with a 1 and 2 year old. I had to leave at 8 in the morning and stayed out until 7 at night. There was nothing to do except go to the church. Social services eventually moved us back and paid deposit for a private rental. Thomas couldn’t move in with us, they kept us apart. We had nothing then, but social services then went out and got us beds, washing machine, everything we needed to live there.

“The second positive was when we phoned social services ourselves to get help. We phoned in because my daughter was sick and my boys had their special needs. The boys broke everything. The social worker went out and bought a pink bed – she loved it because they had asked her what she wanted. She said she wanted a pink bed, so they got her one. She was so happy.

“The third positive was back in Guildford, three years ago. The kids wanted to go and do chips and fish (holiday activities). They go and do it from 10-4. But it was too expensive for us to afford it. So social services paid for them to be able to go for a week to the summer clubs, which gave us a break, which really made a difference for us too. And they paid for a school uniform.”

“My son had ADHD. They paid for him to go on an activity trip. They said they didn’t want children from the same family going. So they paid for all of them to go on different trips. It was so positive.”

“One of my kids that I had, after he was born I was allocated a social worker. She came to see me for a pre-birth assessment. After he was born she read the papers from before, from the other children. She said ‘I’ve read the papers, but I want to treat this as if this is your first child.’ She asked ‘is there anything that you are needing?’ She went out and came with me to go to Mothercare to get a brand new cot and stuff and doctors’ meetings.”

Practitioners

“Our team is frontdoor and we often get families that we might know or who are new who are requesting money – so something’s happened with their benefits or they can’t afford uniforms. The service they get really depends on the manager. Usually we tend to give families a really hard time, asking them loads and loads of questions, making it really difficult. We need to think about the money we have got and how we use that. There’s this overly process-driven side of it. As a social worker you have to negotiate with the manager, you are in the middle a little bit. You want to just give them some money but then the manager says no because then they will keep on coming back. And you just think, ‘god, what is this attitude?’ ... Before, when families would present with us for money there was a figure of £2.50 per child, per day. That was good while it lasted because, although it was a small amount, at least the money was there and you didn’t have to negotiate and argue all the time about it.”

“An example I had, things were getting worse and worse in terms of child protection, a partner of a woman, in an abusive relationship, tampered with the electric or gas - it was cut off and they wouldn’t put it back on. So things had escalated because the children were in a freezing cold house and the solution everyone had was ‘why can’t you reconnect it for them?’ And there were people who said ‘well no you can’t do that because then she’ll never learn.’ Things got to the point where there were legal proceedings. When money came to deal with the gas and electric it was like a turning point for the other issues. The mum felt very stigmatised and victimised because she wasn’t able to keep the electric on, even though it wasn’t her fault in the first place. So this idea of being able to support families financially through crisis points in their life being a negative thing...”

“Managers are under their own pressures too as there is no money to spend on anything anymore. Every year there is less money. We have to think about that too. I don’t know the law in area of children, but someone told me something about s 17 children in need funding, but I understand that that is money that can be used to support families in need in crisis. I am thinking back to a case of someone we worked with a long time ago in housing. They hadn’t looked after their place very

well and so they got evicted. They didn't have any money to pay for deposit for a new flat. So housing department referred them to social services because it seemed like they couldn't then support their child. The social work team thought about what to do, thinking they might have to foster the child. Luckily the family went to Shelter, who are really excellent on the law. They said that there was no problem - that for the local authority it was much cheaper to pay one month's rent than it was to go through a whole fostering process. They wrote a long letter with all the case law and at the very end said that if you don't help we are going to pursue judicial review. As soon as the letter went off the local authority found the money and it came from s 17."

"We should remember also that it could cost more to be poor – if you are using a meter or live on an estate and it takes three busses to get to a supermarket – sometimes it costs more. You can't necessarily do anything about that, but helping people to manage and deal with that reality. You could, for example, go shopping with families, which is really important for how you manage money and how you buy stuff that is good for the family – but it's the manner in which you do it."

"We deal a lot with the question of material stuff. We have community centres in very difficult neighbourhoods in Israel, just for girls and young women (13-25). It's multicultural. One of the common bases is gender and poverty. Since our inception we opened a hair salon in a small house... All the practice is built from what the people ask from us or tell us about their life. One of the major things we do is the material stuff. We have food and computers, services, office where they can use telephone or internet. We give money for every day-to-day needs. People can come to us and if they don't have food or money or clothes for school or they don't have electricity and we give money to allow barriers to open. We have to be with them where they are. ... One of the girls who was 14, now 25, with 3 kids, after the 3rd was born there were bad conditions so welfare wanted to take them. We had a very hard struggle to separate the idea of her poverty and her ability to raise them. We tried to convince them that she could do it if she was given help and support. In the end of the process they gave her day care until 7pm for all three kids (instead of taking them out of the home). We committed that we are going to be there all the way. After that there was a money question because daycare until 7pm costs. She didn't have the money to pay. So I found a donor to give us money for 6 months. In those 6 months she went to social security to get a benefit/disability allowance (because she was having panic attacks all the time). In those 6 months she got time to rest and then was able to return to work afterwards. The relationship she has with welfare today is very good because they saw all her improvements and all her efforts."

"I am supporting a couple of families where, being aware of social work practice, it's clear that there is material deprivation, but there's also severe depression from the mother and that is raising questions over whether she can look after the children. So it's not clear cut what the issues are at play there. If the child is taken away, no one will say because of material deprivation, but that the mother can't cope because of mental health. But it's not that simple, there are many factors building up and material deprivation can play a huge role. Parents are judged because of the way they are suffering for things sparked by material deprivation."