

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
<i>About the Editors and Contributors</i>	vi
<i>Introduction</i>	ix

Part One: Introduction

Chapter 1 The Art of Social Work Practice <i>Toyin Okitikpi and Cathy Aymer</i>	1
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Part Two: Concepts and Ideas in Practice

Chapter 2 The Importance of Theory in Social Work Practice <i>Toyin Okitikpi and Cathy Aymer</i>	12
Chapter 3 Avoiding Dangerous Practice <i>Toyin Okitikpi and Cathy Aymer</i>	21
Chapter 4 The New Challenges of Anti-discriminatory and Anti-oppressive Practice in Social Work <i>Toyin Okitikpi and Cathy Aymer</i>	29

Part Three: The Art of Social Work Practice

Chapter 5 Preventative Social Work Practice <i>Steve Trevillion</i>	39
Chapter 6 Planning in Social Work Practice <i>Charles O'Brian</i>	56
Chapter 7 Communication in Practice <i>Rachana Patni</i>	71

Chapter 8	Assessment in Practice Annabel Goodyer	86
Chapter 9	Decision Making in Social Work Practice Jeremy Ross	101
Chapter 10	User Involvement and Participation David Ward	114
Chapter 11	Working in Partnership and Collaboratively with other Professionals Jenny Weinstein	126
Index		145

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About the Editors and Contributors

The Editors

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Introduction

For many people outside the profession it is difficult to understand why anybody would want to become a social worker. Many workers have relayed their experience of the different reactions they have observed once people realise that they are talking to a social worker. There are, of course, those who are admiring and would enthuse about the bravery of social workers, and then there are those who take the opposite view and see social workers as simply uncaring people who are agents of the state. For some, social workers are over-zealous 'do-gooders' whose *raison d'être* is to disrupt family life, act in haste and are ineffectual in preventing all kinds of child and adult abuse. It is also interesting to read in social work publications implicit depictions of (your average) social workers as incapable, incompetent, unthinking and lacking in 'common sense' from whom service users really should be protected. The depiction of the demonic social worker is not just in the imagination of the popular press, since reading between the lines of some social work publications shows that this negative characterisation is also to be found in the most unlikely places.

While it is healthy for a continued critique and discussion about ways of improving practice, the impression that is often given is that social workers are essentially racist (of course, only the white ones), middle-class professionals, who are uncaring and whose aim is to reinforce and if possible exacerbate service users' situations and conditions. It would not be a revelation to suggest that social work is a complex profession and it works with some of the most vulnerable people in society, some of whom have the most difficult problems. However, social work is also not just about dealing with problems and difficult situations. There are times when social workers provide help and support to people who are not necessarily vulnerable but who require advice, help or information. The practice of social work is not easy and despite the vilification and the lack of respect for the profession, social work practitioners continue to ply their trade (in the main), in a diligent and caring manner. It is worth reiterating that many people enter social work in order to 'do good' and improve the lives of those facing difficulties, and in the process change

society for the better. They have a belief in social justice and a desire to help move towards a more equal society. Some may question such motives and deem them patronising and unrealistic but these altruistic values, in addition to other reasons, underlie many people's decision to enter the profession. As Adams, Dominelli and Payne (2002) observed, people are motivated to enter the social work for complex and varied reasons. Quoting Cree's (1991) finding, Adams, Dominelli and Payne (2002: 99) highlighted the fact that people are motivated to embark on social work training because of; 'family background, significant life experience of loss, illness or disability, and adult choice including social work as a vocation to care for individuals, as means of 'changing the system' and promoting social justice or as a career.

It is our contention that generally social workers do make a difference, for the better, in people's lives. The numbers of cases where social workers have got it so badly wrong that it has led to tragic consequences are relatively small in comparison to the sheer numbers of people they deal with each year. Of course every death, poor service and near miss should be scrutinised and placed under the gaze of an inquiry so that lessons can be learnt and future occurrence minimised. However, without underplaying the importance of the tragedies that have occurred, and the contributing factors of systems failures and poor practices, it is worth keeping things in perspective and acknowledging that social workers attempt to help people to regain a balance, however minimal, and a semblance of normality in their lives.

About this book

This book is intended to encourage practitioners, students and academics as well as lay readers, who are interested in social work, to take a fresh look at the approaches and methods adopted in practice. The aim is to open up a debate about the value and important role that relationship building could play in working effectively with service users. The trend away from relationship building towards an outcome orientated profession is predicated on the belief that change or positive outcome is only possible through a brief and targeted intervention. We do not dispute the possible efficacy of a focused approach; however in our view an effective approach is not incompatible with building professional relationships and working closely with service users. Social work is about communication and human contact and the range of relationships that flow from it. In order to be able to achieve this aim there is a need for social work to reassert the idea of treating people as subjects with all the messiness that accompanies it.

The book is divided into three parts although each part is self-contained and chapters can be read non-sequentially. The theme that unites the chapters is the questioning and fresh approach towards familiar social work concepts, themes and ideas. While this is not a *how to do it* book there are practice examples as well as

questions that are posed for consideration in a number of the chapters to illustrate the applicability of the ideas and concepts under discussion. In the chapters where there are no specific cases or practice examples the aim is to encourage reflection and consideration of the ideas presented. The first part, also Chapter 1, sets out the context of the book and discusses the importance of social work reclaiming its essential core, namely relationship building and developing partnership with service users in a more engaging and subjective way. It argues that in the wake of restructuring and reorganisation in welfare provisions, social work appears to have abandoned its relationship building abilities and settled for what could be described as an arm's length approach. Chapter 1 argues that while it is important for social welfare organisations and the profession to rejuvenate themselves through changes and reorganisations, it is also important that the core and essential elements that characterises the profession are not only preserved but reasserted.

Part 2 focuses attention on three important areas in social work, namely; social work theory; avoiding dangerous practice and anti-discriminatory practice. Chapter 2 encourages a slightly different approach to how we think about theory in social work. The chapter does not criticise or dislodge the existing body of theories in social work, rather it suggests that practitioners need to expose their ideas and their approaches to the very people whom they intend to benefit from their intervention. In Chapter 3 there is an attempt to provide sets of ideas and questions for practitioners to consider in preventing dangerous practice. In Chapter 4 anti-discriminatory practice is given a different slant and the emphasis is on encouraging practitioners to take a less binary and absolutist view of discrimination. As well as making the obvious point that no group has a monopoly on perpetuating discriminatory practices, it asks practitioners to trust their instincts and make a 'virtue out of doing good'.

The focus of Part 3 is to look at how these ideas are put into practice. In Chapter 5 Trevillion sets the context in which policies have been designed to develop flexible and community-based responses to health and social care needs. He asserts that preventative social work can never be a scientific enterprise and explores the intriguing idea of the unintended negative outcome of preventative social work. In Chapter 6 Charles O'Brian discusses the pressures social workers are under and how these are brought about by the change in focus from providers of services to a more managerial and coordinating role. He argues that despite the complexities of the role and task of social work, planning has to be at the forefront of practitioners' thinking. He builds on many of the existing practice ideas and offers a number of interesting suggestions to improve on planning.

Taking an unorthodox approach, in Chapter 7 Rachana Patni explores and analyses communication in social work practice. In the chapter she explores three themes and

in each theme she provides a lucid deconstruction and reconstruction of communication. Finally, she demonstrates how the ideals of postcolonial theorising and relationship-oriented interventions can help us shed new light on how we think about communication in social work practice.

In Chapter 8 Annabel Goodyer explores the nature of assessment and offers an overview of the various legislative frameworks that support the role of assessment in social work. She also posits that social work assessment is a skilled activity because it requires familiarity with the knowledge-base, the ability to collate and analyse information, familiarity with the setting in order to understand the potential risks and, finally, familiarity with the assessment tool being used. Social work management is increasingly about conflicting priorities and in Chapter 9 Jeremy Ross discusses how these can be balanced within nationally set frameworks and priorities. Drawing from his personal and professional experiences he focuses on decision making in social work and considers the pressures and uncertainties that practitioners, particularly managers, face when making decisions. David Ward, in Chapter 10, takes a look at user involvement and participation and asks whether practitioners see service users as active partners in defining and resolving the problems that confront them, or whether social work staff or organisations take the lead. In Chapter 11 Jenny Weinstein reminds us that there is a dearth of theory or research underpinning the concepts of partnership and collaboration specifically in relation to social work. Using a number of practice situations as exemplars, Weinstein highlights the importance of demystifying the stereotypes that different professionals hold of each other.