Task-Centered Social Work

Mark Doel and
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TASK-CENTRED SOCIAL WORK

To Jan and Annie

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Introduction

Contemporary social work practice is generally shrouded from professional and public view. Workers have few, if any, methods for learning from the successful or unsuccessful practice of others. Clients rarely participate in an informed choice of the service that they might obtain, not least because succinct descriptions of practice, with some analysis of outcome, are rarely available and so cannot be shared. Social work is very far from logging the experiences of practice and then developing practice on the basis of worker and client views, and the outcome of particular approaches. Apart from the law, the main guide to practice seems to be agency routine, professional folklore and personal foible. Each encounter is lost to the individual worker and to others because it is not entered into the pool of knowledge and experience.

To people outside of social work this must seem a surprising state of affairs. Why isn't practice developing by building on the most successful work? Why aren't clients contributing directly to this development? Some social workers may answer that the demands of day-to-day practice are often overwhelming, leaving little space to analyse the factors which lead to success or failure and even less to log those factors in a systematic fashion.

Lack of time is only one factor. In addition, the profession has lacked common frameworks to catalogue its achievements and its failures. How do social workers talk to each other about the outcomes of their work? In some professions we might look to the

customers to force the pace, but social work's customers rarely have the opportunity to get together to compare notes.

Finding out what works is not easy in social work. It stands at a complex junction where very small and very large forces are at play; making judgements about what helped and what hindered is as much art as science. However, the willingness to ask the question, *what works?* is as important as the possibility of answering it. And there are some answers available.

If we cannot or will not discuss questions like *what works?* how can we ask users of the services to trust us? For example, a parent of a school child wants to talk with the teacher about *what works* for his or her child. Some parents will be interested in all aspects of their child's development, others might emphasize academic attainment, social progress or sporting achievements. The parent looks to the teacher for a professional understanding of what promotes children's development in general and their own child's in particular. This builds trust on the basis of mutual understanding – not on ignorance or unquestioning faith.

Social workers need the tools to be able to discuss *what works* or, at least, what *might* work and to discuss this not just with each other, but also with the users of social work. This requires a model of practice which will bring system to the experiences of practitioners.

In addition to a notion of good practice, there is another reason why it is important to help social workers to communicate with each other and with their clients about what they do and whether it works. That factor is the rapid change in the nature of the social work job brought about by major legislation affecting the probation service and the social services. Twenty years after Brewer and Lait (1980) wrote their apocalyptic diatribe, *Can Social Work Survive?*, we can see that although social work may survive, the social work task could be balkanized.

The potential for fragmentation is increased by the deepening divide between issues of care and control in social work. As the voluntary functions in social work attract the interests of the private sector, the unattractive supervisory functions could become marginalized as part of a diminished state social work service. It is crucial that we avoid a two-tier service.

All of this makes our task in this book urgent. We need to develop an understanding of what a model of practice is and a working knowledge of specific models. In this way practitioners can

begin to compare notes about what works, when and with whom. They can begin to research their own practice and to involve the users of the social services in this process. Together they can speak with authority about the value of social work.

We have written this book in order to provide an introduction to a systematic model of practice. It is a model with an explicit ethical base and a practical application which has been well-researched. It is this research pedigree which attracts us to task-centred practice, one of the few models of practice that is home-grown within social work, and one which has been tried and tested in virtually every social work setting.

Task-Centred Social Work provides both a broad framework and a detailed practice guide which bridges the care and control divide. It continually guides the worker and the client towards asking and answering the question *what works?* and it provides a structure which enables comparisons to be made between that work then and this work now, that work there and this work here.

The task-centred model promotes a partnership between the workers and the user of the service, and makes it clear when this partnership is not possible to achieve. It also makes explicit issues of power in social work relationships and, as Coulshed (1988, p. 55) writes, 'the task-centred approach is the one most favoured by those who are trying to devise models for ethnic-sensitive practice'. By confronting issues of power directly and by coming clean about the use of professional authority, in a modest way it promotes anti-oppressive practice.

A guide to this book

We hope to put forward the main elements of the task-centred model in a clear and logical manner. First and foremost, this book is written with an intention that the material in it can be put to *use*. The book's structure follows the different stages of the model, from the first contact with a potential client through to the ending of the work. We think that this approach working in sequence through the stages that a practitioner would follow, provides the best framework for understanding the model. The penalty of such an approach is that the overall shape of the model cannot be seen clearly until the end, though the outline contained in this introduc-

tion may help. We shall briefly describe the model and the link with the relevant chapters.

The model

How is task-centred practice carried out? Primarily, by an active intervention with an emphasis on the role of the client in negotiating and undertaking appropriate programmes of help. It is a doing model, where learning will be as likely to occur by demonstration as by discussion. It is a participative model, where the client should be as fully informed and as fully involved as possible. The work will be based on an *agreement between the worker and the client* which will cover the problems to be addressed and the goals to be achieved. When necessary, these problems and goals will include those specified by legislative duties or by a court. This agreement, which will necessarily be based upon negotiation, starts the work in a participative style.

Chapter 2 outlines the ways that a mandate for intervention may be established and how this important issue is addressed in task-centred practice, and Chapters 3 and 4 explain the ways in which this mandate is carried out in practice by the exploration of problems, the clarification of goals and the use of written agreements.

Once the basis for work is established, the worker and the client proceed in a series of incremental steps towards the goals. This work is subject to regular review. The incremental steps will involve the client and the worker undertaking tasks in order to reach the agreed goals, and these tasks may themselves involve collaboration with other people. The worker may need to help the client carry out certain tasks by advice, encouragement or skill training. The regular review highlights the progress of work and pinpoints any need to address different problems or revise goals. Chapter 5 describes the details of the work on tasks which is central to the model, and Chapter 6 outlines the review and ending of an intervention.

In summary, the pattern of the work is a movement from *problems* through a sequence of *tasks* to *goals*. This is a progression from something which is wrong (problems) to something which is wanted (goals). Problems and goals are both agreed in the initial stage and the movement occurs by the undertaking of a number of actions (tasks). Tasks are effective because they are part of an overall action plan; any one task is unlikely to lead directly to the

goal. Clearly, there are strong parallels with the way that we tackle significant problems in our lives; we try to work out what is wrong, we try to see what is wanted in the light of this and we take a number of steps which we hope will move us towards what is wanted.

In task-centred practice the worker and the client will agree at the outset how long the movement from problems to goals is likely to take. In general the *time limit* will be as short as reasonably possible. If it is likely to exceed about three months, or if there is a reason for long-term involvement (such as a statutory order), work can proceed by a series of shorter-term agreements.

All of these ingredients will appear familiar to social work practitioners. They follow themes that feature in most practice and, at a general level, they would be subscribed to by many social workers who do not claim to be using this approach. However, in our experience there is often a chasm between an agreement with general themes and an ability to put these into detailed practice. This book aims to bridge that divide and to explore (in Chapter 7) some common misconceptions about task-centred practice.

The structure of the chapters

In order to illustrate the model in action we have provided a Case Example. This concludes each chapter from 2 to 6, taking the reader from one stage to the next with the same case. Inevitably, one example is limiting, but it is carefully chosen to help to outline the model; of course, it cannot represent all of task-centred practice.

We have also decided to provide examples from everyday life throughout the book in order to illustrate the link between the model of problem-solving in task-centred work and the models that we might apply in our own lives. This makes an important link between the situations faced by users of social services and those faced by all citizens. We all have problems of one sort or another – there is not one world of problems for clients and another for professionals. This is an important principle, though we recognize that the problem examples in this book are not so pressing as those experienced by many clients; the examples are designed solely as *illustrations* of the process of problem-solving.

A basic handbook

We hope that the book will be used as a practice handbook and we have included a number of checklists (Appendix 1) which beginners may use to assess their own practice, or a supervisor or teacher to help others. The book is introductory and there is a brief guide to further reading to help establish a good basis for practising task-centred work (Appendix 2). The limits on an introductory book are evident; for example, we have not been able to cover specific settings such as probation or group care, nor have we addressed task-centred groupwork and the latest developments in task-centred family work. The reader will need to move to more specialized literature to cover these areas.

Getting started

Task-centred work is a demanding discipline. The skills and knowledge needed are as complex as any in social work and they rest on a commitment by the practitioner to provide a service which is based on the twin principles of openness and research-minded practice. Without these principles, task-centred practice will be enacted as a parody; with these principles it is an important key for both worker and client to unlock the question, *what works?*

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1 A Practice Model

Over the past 30 years there has been a steady growth in the development of task-centred practice. It is a model of practice that originates within social work itself and that has been developed by social workers and social work researchers. The authors of this book have followed in that tradition, basing their work on many years' experience of using the model, and also on the training and research they have undertaken in task-centred work.

Evaluating a practice model

Why should we be paying attention to task-centred practice? There are three reasons why a model of practice may be considered worthy of our detailed attention; there are ethical reasons why we might want to criticize or adopt certain approaches, there are research reasons and there are practical reasons.

Ethics

Social work has always been concerned with ethical dilemmas, not least because of an active involvement with individuals and families in society's marginal groups. Social workers regularly work with people who are stigmatized or discriminated against. The value placed on human attributes, for instance being able-bodied or young or white, will often feature in the options that people have in society