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## Counselling Skills and Social Work Practice

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between counselling and social work has always been complex and interactive. Relationship, one person interacting with another, is at the heart of all social work in health and social care settings. Social work emerged as profession in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today it is profession charged with fulfilling the social mandate of promoting well being and quality of life. Thus social work encompasses activities directed at improving human and social conditions and alleviating human distress and social problems. It is essential that social workers take responsibility for developing and improving those skills which enable them to build relationships. This enables them to provide a professional service for which they can be accountable. Social workers become involved with people needing support in a crisis, change, transition or loss; protection from self or others; help to deal with disadvantage or injustice; in fact any combination of life changing events depending on the particular circumstances (Seden and Katz 2003). The present paper attempts to focus on relationship between counselling skills and social work practice.

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Social work emerged as profession in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today it is profession charged with fulfilling the social mandate of promoting well being and quality of life. Thus social work encompasses activities directed at improving human and social conditions and alleviating human distress and social problems. The social worker attempts to make it possible for the client to face and change his offending behaviour through this warm, accepting and understanding relationship. Relationship, one person interacting with another, is at the heart of all social work in health and social care settings. Counselling and communication skills are used every day to build such relationships in order for the work to happen. All social work processes: interviewing, assessment, planning, interventions, and evaluations, take place in the context of meeting people, their worries and their life crises. The quality of what happens relies heavily on conversations between people. Poor services are often marked by conflict and hostile relations between service users, their families and the workers. Quality services rely on the ability to

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build a co-operative partnership where social workers and service users participate together. Relationship-building skills remain the bedrock of quality in practice, especially when people who need a service are anxious, angry, distressed or upset because of their situation. Skill can be defined simply as the ability to 'do something well'. This definition works well enough for some practical tasks. However what is 'done well' in a social work context is more complicated to judge. Whether a communication is 'good' depends on how it is received in the situation and what is conveyed to the other person. A skilful communication enhances the other person's experience.

Skill can be defined simply as the ability to 'do something well'. This definition works well enough for some practical tasks. However what is 'done well' in a social work context is more complicated to judge. Whether a communication is 'good' depends on how it is received in the situation and what is conveyed to the other person. A skilful communication enhances the other person's experience and their ability to respond and participate. What is skilful creates a sense of working together. As these brief scenarios show, communication is the everyday currency of human interaction, but the context in which communication takes place changes the meanings of words and what lies behind them. Both social workers had more power than the woman requesting help because they could give or withhold a service. The experience of telephoning social services was new for both women who were understandably apprehensive. The social worker might have been nervous about her abilities but had a responsibility to take the call professionally and competently and to enable the caller's concerns to be her priority. It is essential that social workers take responsibility for developing and improving those skills which enable them to build relationships. This enables them to provide a professional service for which they can be accountable. From babies to older people, everyone communicates. When there is a specific impairment that impedes communication creative ways and means to overcome this can be found. Much communication skill is commonplace in that it is learned in the process of socialization. Each person learns a communicating style from parents and others in the cultural environment where they grow up. Professional workers, however, meet people from a range of cultures, backgrounds and abilities. They need therefore to be open to learning how to improve their interactions with a whole range of 'others'. The skills developed over the years for training counsellors to build good relationships and use them in therapeutic processes provide a useful starting place for applying skills to social work practice.

### *Contexts for practice:*

At one time, it would have seemed obvious that social workers use counselling and casework in their tasks (Perlman 1957). However from the 1980s onwards, a preoccupation with markets, commissioners, providers, resources and outcomes (Taylor-Gooby and Lawson 1993) might have led an observer to the conclusion that such skills were no longer needed. Social workers employed in local authorities may have entered the profession thinking that they would focus on the kind of assistance given by counsellors to their clients. Instead, they found themselves

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overwhelmed by work of a more bureaucratic and directive kind in order to meet the requirements of the procedures in social services departments. Harris Perlman (2002) outlines how the new right under Margaret Thatcher and then John Major was committed to the reform of the welfare state. They introduced business thinking into the organization of social services, arguing their case from economic necessity. This was followed by the modernization agenda of new Labour (Department of Health 1998a, 2000a, 2001b). This collection of changes is often referred to as 'managerialism'. Waite and Henderson (2003: 51) define this as 'an overarching set of changes introduced in the UK from the 1980s onwards that involve providing effective services at lower cost through the application of management techniques borrowed from business and industry'. Social workers become involved with people needing support in a crisis, change, transition or loss; protection from self or others; help to deal with disadvantage or injustice; in fact any combination of life changing events depending on the particular circumstances (Seden and Katz 2003).

Many social workers still want to 'care', often motivated by the wish to 'help people' and 'make a difference'. The mandate to safeguard people from harm and to promote their welfare is embedded in the legislation under which social workers carry out their tasks. Counselling skills, used to communicate and build relationships are central to care. Work with children, young people and adults, with colleagues in multi disciplinary teams, in partnerships across agencies, and activities for continuing professional development all require attention to the detail of speaking and relating. The core business of social work is still 'people' and 'talk'. Communicating, face to face, on the telephone, by email, by letter and in written reports remains a key skill. This is underpinned by the values of conveying respect and combating discrimination and disadvantage, using a knowledge base which has been developed from the social sciences over the second half of the twentieth century and redefined as society changes. Social work moves into the twenty-first century with a distinctive contribution to offer society and a more secure knowledge base on which to draw for practice.

### ***The relationship between counselling and social work:***

The relationship between counselling and social work has always been complex and interactive. As two distinct activities they share some theoretical origins and ways of thinking. Professionals who qualified in the 1960s and 70s were grounded in casework principles based on psychodynamic theoretical underpinnings. Since those times social work training has moved in other directions adopting social learning (behavioural) theories, ecological and systems theories and a range of derivative practice methods (Seden 2001 and 2005). Through the radical and Marxist approaches of the 80s and the development of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice in the 90s it has reclaimed the original pre-occupation with social inequalities, injustice and social exclusion, working with people's own strengths and abilities using advocacy and empowerment strategies, despite a climate of resource constraint. By the mid-1990s, however, casework appeared to be less prioritized than empowerment ideologies

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and functionalism. The idea of a therapeutic relationship appeared to be subsumed to bureaucratic priorities. Some social workers might have argued that counselling skills were no longer relevant to social work practice and that the focus on the struggles of the individual was anthropologizing. This tension was possibly more about ideology than practice, and a renewed certainty about the value base of the profession has also brought renewed recognition of the centrality of communication and counselling skills to re active social work practice.

The National Occupational Standards for Social Work identify six key roles in which the 'key core skill of communication (verbal and written), alongside application of number and information technology skills' is embedded within the requirements for qualifying training. Both basic and more advanced counselling skills will be needed for professionals to carry out the six key roles and as they move from qualifying to post qualifying and advanced practitioner awards. Counselling services and the methods used by counsellors have become more diverse. Psychodynamic counselling remains a major theoretical approach, but many others also flourish (for example, person-centred, cognitive-behavioural, and integrative). Counselling practice has been re-evaluated for its relevance to women, black people, lesbian, gay and bisexual people, younger and older people and those who are disabled. Counselling training, like social work training, has re-examined its ideologies and practice as society's attitudes and values have changed. Paternalistic and discriminatory ideologies and models have been challenged and approaches re-examined. Theory and practice in the two areas of work remain complementary. At the same time, there is still a lack of clarity about the boundaries between the activities of social work and counselling. At one extreme all direct work with clients in social work agencies is labelled counselling, while at the other some social workers regard counselling as entirely a matter for specialist referral or the commissioning of services. Both extremes fail to negotiate the boundaries between the two disciplines adequately. The Barclay report identified counselling as one of the two main activities of social workers, the other being social care planning, and the report acknowledged the interlocking nature of these activities. The particular, perhaps unique, challenge faced by social workers is to offer counselling in a way that is integrated appropriately with a variety of other approaches in the overall work with a given client often within the same interview. She continues:

A logical categorization of the counselling dimensions of social work would therefore be as follows:

- Counselling skills underpinning the whole range of social work.
- Counselling as a significant component of the work, carried out in conjunction with other approaches.
- Counselling as a major explicit part of the job description.

The lack of clarity about the role of counselling in social work practice is perhaps an outcome of the symbiotic relationship with the newly emerging social work profession, which in its early days was seeking to identify which areas of expertise distinguished it from other professional

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activities. This was most clearly the case in the second half of the twentieth century when casework literature from America dominated social work. In the 1990s it became possible to assert that the distinctiveness of social work might be identified more by a value base, within legal mandates, than by particular sets of methods.

### ***Social work and counselling in the twenty-first century:***

The National Occupational Standards for social workers defines social work as: A profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers)

A holistic model of social work is promoted which describes six key roles (standards in Scotland) underpinned by values and ethics, which are:

1. Prepare for, and work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to assess their needs and circumstances.
2. Plan, carry out, review and evaluate social work practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals.
3. Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances.
4. Manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues.
5. Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organization.
6. Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice.

### ***The basic skills required by the social workers can be identified as:***

- Attention giving; active listening; non-critical acceptance;
- Paraphrasing; reacting back; summarizing and checking;
- Ability to use different kinds of questions; minimal prompting; alternatives to questions;
- Empathic understanding; linking; immediacy;
- Challenging; confronting; work with defences;
- Goal setting; problem solving; focusing techniques;
- Knowledge about own and other's use of body language;
- Avoidance of judging and moralistic responses;
- Boundary awareness; structuring techniques; the ability to say difficult things constructively;
- The ability to offer feedback; techniques for defusing, avoiding the creation of and managing hostility;

## CONCLUSION

The social work provides an ecological perspective which suggests social workers are engaged with people who are themselves interacting with their environments. It also reminds social workers that they are there to promote change and to enhance wellbeing. The principles that guide practice are those of respecting rights and promoting social justice. These aspirations are unlikely to conflict with the ethics of doctors, counsellors or other professionals with whom social workers collaborate, but social workers have a distinct role in keeping a focus on people's expressed needs, understanding the impact on people of economic and social inequalities and offering social support. They have powers and duties to intervene on behalf of the state to safeguard both adults and children from harm. They have key roles in building networks to provide services and working in multidisciplinary teams and agencies. Hence, Counselling skills are necessary for social workers in order to meet these ends.

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### *Conflict of Interests*

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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