

Open Learn: Learning Space audio transcript
K315_1: Panel discussion on critical practice, Part 2
Clip 2b

Winifred

Behind a great deal of what we have been discussing has been the whole idea of power, and the nature of the power that the social worker holds. Steve Trevillion, I'd like to turn to that now more directly. What is the nature of the power then that the social worker holds? It must be, I suppose, multifaceted. It's to do with knowledge. It's to do with being a gatekeeper to resources. Tell me about it.

Steve

Well, like everything else we've been talking about, I think it's pretty complicated really. I think there's a power which is related to the specific job that the social worker is doing. In other words, they're not just an individual, they're representing an organisation. We've already had the example of gate keeping and rationing of scarce resources. And inevitably anyone who has a role in making decisions about who will, or will not, get resources has power. So there's an imbalance built into that kind of role. Now, of course, not all social workers work in those kinds of roles. But, even if they don't, there are other types of power to be considered, I think. I mean one is the issue of expertise and professionalism, and the role of professionals in our society. There is a sense in which social workers are often uncomfortable with their professionalism. It's got a long history in social work of being actively contested as an idea. But, nevertheless, coming into a situation as somebody who is perceived as an authoritative person, somebody whose views count, who has respect, status, etc, etc, all can have a bearing on a situation.

Now of course, in some senses, we all of us want to be taken seriously and want to be treated with respect, and so on. But I think it can also be dangerous because undue respect can get into the situation, and people can feel that their views don't matter so much, or that the person in front of them obviously is very knowledgeable, very powerful, very important and so on. Status issues can come into play, which are to do, not with actually being a social worker, but with your general status in society. Issues of race are very important. Issues of class always in this country are terribly important. And accent, and gender, age, disability. I think you can't get away from the fact that there are power imbalances built into almost every aspect of social work practice and, of course, it's one of the key lessons of critical practice to try always to be mindful of power relations, and always to be thinking about the impact of those power relations on what is going on between you and the other person.

Winifred

Can you give us a practical example?

Steve

Well I think, if you for example go into a situation ... let's take an adult situation of something under the terms of the NHS and Community Care Act, where there is an assessment going on. And you're going to meet somebody who is in a vulnerable situation. They may well have ideas about how their situation could be improved. But, when you come into that situation, you may be uncomfortably aware of how scarce various resources are, or how limited resources are that you have to offer. I think it's very important to be open minded; not to start off with a checklist in your own mind of things that you've got to offer, and just be interested in ticking those off and completing the assessment in that way. It's very important to put all of that away, to some extent, and really listen to the person. This issue of listening we keep coming back to don't we?

Listen to the person. What are they saying? What are their needs? And I think one of the most interesting developments in recent years has been the focus on desired outcomes. Not just needs, in the sense of what you as a professional might think somebody needs, but what changes does this person want in their life? What is it that you could potentially contribute, as a professional, to change and an improvement in the quality of their life? And, if you can find something that can meet one of those desired outcomes, then of course the whole process can be justified. And it's very important therefore to get away from the idea that you are simply representing a powerful organisation, and trying to fit somebody into it. It's important to listen and to see your role as trying to find a way of enabling that person to feel a bit more powerful in their own lives, feel a bit more effective and feel a bit more as if life has something to offer them than perhaps it did before.

Winifred

Maggie Mellon?

Maggie

Yes. I mean it is a very interesting question, and I thought about the relationship between the statutory agencies which have legislative power and voluntary organisations, such as the one I'm working with now, where we actually need to negotiate everything. Formally the 'Children First' was the 'Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children', and did have inspectors, and did have powers to remove children from their homes and take them away. And that all changed with the Social Work in Scotland Act and the development of the social work departments in Scotland.

So it's quite interesting how much you're assumed to have lost all knowledge when you join the voluntary sector. And I practised as a social worker for, and a manager in social work, for twenty years before I went to the voluntary sector. But, from one day to the next, one day I was an expert on child protection who could make decisions and remove children and decide they should be adopted, and all sorts of things, and the next day I was a fool who would be phoning up a newly qualified social worker, and she would or he would say, "Oh no, we don't consider that child protection".

So I think it's an interesting thing about power and how you can lose it when you don't work in a statutory agency. And I think that tells us something about the relationship between us and the people we work with, because it was actually very freeing not to have that power and to reflect on what the personal skills were that you needed to work with people and engage with them, and to see at a distance what has become of the relationship between the statutory departments. Quite often I think all the mistakes and the tragedies that have been in child protection have been about power and the misuse of power, whether it's been by not using it when you should, or by trying to transfer it around all the different people passing the buck. But there is something about this having the power and either using it inappropriately and wrongly.

I think we need to ... social workers need to stop holding power to themselves, because the more that you actually empower and share out the power to change lives with the people we're working with, the more power you actually get. And I'm not an advocate ... I'm a very strong advocate of protecting children in the best way possible, but I don't think necessarily that there's a very straight relationship between the use of statutory powers to just decide and move things around the board is the right way to do that.