



Underpinning Knowledge

Introduction

This section looks at the main areas of knowledge that inform our communication with service users, carers, professionals and others. Social work deals with a range of different problems some of which are relatively straight forward and simple, requiring practical solutions, whilst other problems are often more complex such as the causes of mental illness and how we might work with others to prevent relapse and to aid recovery. The perspective that lies at the heart of this e-learning resource is that in order to be helpful – and to work with people in ways that move events forward - we need to be able to understand what is happening and why and to be able to turn to those theories that aid understanding and action. For this to happen, we need to be able to draw on knowledge from a number of disciplines and also different types of knowledge (Trevithick 2008: 2117). The six main areas of knowledge that are most often used in social work include:

1. **Social theories**
2. **Psychological theories**
3. **Biological theories**
4. **Law and social policy**
5. **Communication theory**
6. **Social work methods**

1. - Social theories

- Social theories emphasise the way that social and cultural factors impact on everyday life and how people make sense of their experiences through shared beliefs and assumptions
- They identify the way that structural inequalities and differences in power and social status, particularly stereotyping, labelling and social stigma, can inhibit communication
- An anti-oppressive approach can help to overcome these barriers and encourage a more open and less defensive dialogue
- Emphasis is placed on the different 'languages', signs and signals that groups communicate. These may be influenced by a person's social class, gender, age, race, or other factors.

2. Psychological theories

- Psychological theories illuminate social workers' understanding of the way in which thoughts and feelings impact on people's perception of events, reactions, behaviour and sense of well-being, and how these emotions are communicated, consciously and unconsciously

- Different theories relating to human development inform the questions and the practice orientation adopted by social workers in their communication. For example, behaviourist approaches focus more on testable and measurable elements of behaviour and psychoanalytic/psychosocial approaches more on unconscious processes
- Communicating thoughts, feelings and behaviour in words, or communicating through play, can be enormously valuable to enhance understanding and to bring about change.

3. Biological theories

- Biological perspectives focus on the extent to which we are governed by our biology, including the functioning of the brain (neurobiology), and the impact on behaviour and mental processes, e.g. a 'fight-flight' response to threat or stress
- Social workers need to adapt their communication to respond to differences in mental functioning. For example, insomnia or stress can impact on concentration, memory, decision making and other behaviour.
- Where physical functioning is impaired, such as head injury or in the case of a stroke, other communication approaches may need to be deployed, such as pictures, writing boards, sign language, etc.

4. Law and social policy

- 'Social work is empowered, guided and controlled by its legal mandate' (Roberts and Preston-Shoot 2000: 183) which has a direct bearing on agency policy, the powers and duties ascribed to social work and, ultimately, social work practice.
- Most service users tend to come across these legal requirements when they encounter difficulties. For some, the complex language of official documents can create anxiety and confusion
- Social workers need to be able to translate and explain the specialist vocabulary embodied in legal terms, agency policy, rules and requirements and to ensure that key elements and their implications are understood.

5. Communication theory

Often the knowledge and understanding we have acquired is most clearly revealed when we attempt to put words to our thoughts and feelings through the process of communication.

- Communication theory identifies a range of concepts to describe how people, groups and organisations exchange information and highlights the complexity of the meaning and messages conveyed and received
- The ability to communicate is central to effective social work practice and can take many forms - through language (linguistics) and speech, the written word including email/internet, other devices, such as video/tape recordings, etc.
- Non-verbal forms of communication can be vitally important, such as body language, choice of words, dress, use of space/distance (proxemics), paralanguage (speed, tone, pitch, intonation). Some elements may be unconscious to one, both or all parties
- An important concept in communication theory is **transferability** (Trevithick 2005: 75-76). This describes the way that knowledge and skills have to be adapted if they are to be made relevant and applicable to the different situations encountered in social work and social care. In effect, it describes 'the ability to remake knowledge for relevance across different contexts' (Fook 2002: 156). The transferability of knowledge and skills calls for a sound understanding of human beings in their particular social contexts and

the ability to use that understanding in ways that are reliable and enduring in difficult, unfavourable or complex situations.

6. Social work methods

- Communication is the means by which different practice theories and perspectives are applied and articulated. These are largely influenced by social and psychological theories and call for different degrees of self knowledge and reflection
- The main theories include task-centred, client-centred, psychodynamic/psychosocial, cognitive behavioural and strength-based approaches. They require the ability to assess and to intervene in ways that address complexity and to be able to communicate with a range of different groups, including individuals, families, groups, communities, and organisations.
- Agency requirements increasingly expect social workers to communicate effectively within limited time periods, which require a more focused form of communication.

Example: the social model of disability

An example of the importance of the knowledge that underpins social work and social care can be found in the **social model of disability** which states that people are not only limited by their attributes or impairment but - importantly - by the way that society is organised. This model highlights the barriers, discrimination and prejudice that disabled people encounter, whether intentionally or not - that lead to their being excluded from key areas of social life. This exclusion may take a physical form, such as buildings that are not accessible, but it also includes an attitude of mind that fails to make appropriate adjustments in ways that can include people who are disabled, such as making information accessible in Braille for people with sight impairments. An understanding of this model is essential when communicating with people who are impaired in some way.

Reference:

Fook, J. (2002) *Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.

Roberts, G. and Preston-Shoot, M. (2000) Law and social work, in M. Davies (ed.) *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social Work*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Trevithick, P. (2005) *Social Work Skills: A Practice Handbook*. 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Trevithick, P. (2008) Revising the knowledge base of social work: a framework for practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, **38**, 1212–1237. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcm026 Advance Access publication May 24, 2007