

PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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Social Work with Disabled People

Second Edition

Michael Oliver
and
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Preface

Since 1983, this book has had a considerable impact on the practice of many social workers. It contributed to our understanding of disability and, for me personally, it remained essential in my teaching. The strength of the book was that it did not attempt to provide simple answers to practising social work in a local authority, rather it required us to become actively involved in developing our practice from a new and more relevant theoretical base. As Mike Oliver said in its original introduction, a sub-title of this book might well have been 'The Social Model of Disability – A Paradigm for Social Work' and it was his hope that it would spawn a new and more exciting social work literature.

It is a matter of regret that, during the process of revision, I have found only a handful of people from within the social work profession who have taken on this challenge. Fortunately this was not true of disabled people and large numbers of individuals and groups from within the disabled people's movement have developed the social model of disability, drawing upon their experience, research and action. While their analysis is highly critical of the failure of social work to respond to the needs of disabled people, it is not without some hope that our profession still has the potential to do so. However, the need for change is urgent if social work is not to relegate itself as perpetually part of the problem.

To be asked to revise this book in 1997 was both a privilege and a pleasure. It has been a unique experience from which I have gained a lot. While many changes have taken place in the past 15 years which needed to be included within the text, it surprised me how much of the original remained valid even today. While this is obviously a complement to the writer, it also reinforces the criticisms of social work, which as a profession has failed to respond sufficiently to the challenge of the social model of disability.

Whilst writing is a single-minded task, it also requires support. I would like to thank three colleagues, Jennifer Harris,

Annie Huntington and Laura Middleton, for their help and comments at various stages. I also wish to thank Liz for her patience and understanding while I have excluded myself to the computer screen for nine months. Most of all I wish to thank Mike Oliver for asking me to do this and for his selfless support and comments throughout the writing. I have been given a very free rein to make the changes I felt were necessary so if any readers are disappointed by the result, I take responsibility.

Finally, I hope that this book is received as a positive contribution to changing the relationship between disabled people, social workers and the welfare state. It is intended as a vehicle for changing social work practice so, although I hope it will stand the test of time as well as the first edition, I also hope that it will contribute to itself becoming out of date.

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BOB SAPEY

Introduction: Setting the Scene

Historically, social work could be said to have started with the formation of the Charity Organisation Society in the 1860s and it is just over a hundred years ago that the first hospital almoner was appointed. By the time of the Second World War, social work had become a reserved occupation but despite its development towards a profession – the gaining of university status for its training, its proactive stance in terms of child and health care and the influence of psychoanalysis on its practice – social work remained essentially concerned with administering welfare on utilitarian principles.

The state was concerned to ensure that welfare be distributed on the basis that it would act as a remedy to dependency rather than as a sedative. The role of the early social workers was to assess the behaviour and motivations of individuals in need to determine how best to help them become self-reliant. The welfare policies of the postwar period introduced the concept of universalism as a means of removing the stigma attached to this distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor and this caused social work to re-evaluate its role.

The debates took many forms – genericism versus specialism, community versus individual, material versus emotional concerns and an independent versus a state-sponsored profession. However, in recent times social work has been replaced to a great extent by care management, and social policy has moved back to utilitarian principles with programmes such as the ‘welfare to work’ initiative of the 1997 Labour government. We find ourselves still with the question of what should be the relationship between social workers and their clients and, indeed, what is social work.

The term ‘social work’ as used here refers to organised professional activity carried out on behalf of individuals or groups of clients. This activity is geared towards the provision

of services on an individual, group or community basis. The adjective 'professional' implies that those who provide these services are certified as competent to do so and are financially rewarded for so doing. The provision of such services does not merely involve the matching of need with resources but will also require professionals to be involved in ascertaining what needs are and arguing for adequate resources to meet those needs. The context of such activity may be a social services department, a hospital, residential accommodation, a voluntary organisation or any other appropriate agency. The range of methods involved will include casework, groupwork and community work, and these may be applied in a variety of settings including the home, residential care, day care and sheltered accommodation.

This is obviously a very broad definition of social work and flies in the face of the current trend to restrict social work to the management of services. While there may be adequate and justifiable reasons for calls upon social work generally to narrow its base of activity, it is not appropriate in the field of disability, for it will be argued throughout this book that disability is not an individual problem. Rather, it is a social problem concerned with the effects of hostile physical and social environments upon impaired individuals, or even a societal one concerned with the way society treats this particular minority group. As such, the base for social work activity with disabled people needs to be broadened, not narrowed. As has been argued for some time:

Many disabilities are the result of social conditions and amenable to social services intervention. Medical care treatment, for example, is not going to solve the low-income, social isolation, and architectural barriers that are major for the disabled. At issue is the conflict over bureaucratic supremacy between the medical and social service parts of government. The clash involves ideological and theoretical differences concerning the nature of the problem and the response. (Albrecht and Levy, 1981:23)

There is also the question of the relationship between theory and practice in social work. There is much disillusionment

with 'ivory-tower academics' whose theorising is not based upon the realities of practice, and again there may well be some justification for this disillusion in social work generally. The idea of social work as a practical activity is of course politically appealing and has led to the promotion of rational models of strategic management by the Social Services Inspectorate (1991a, b) and the adoption of competence outcomes for training by CCETSW. In terms of disability this approach is not new. Hanvey (1981) and Bell and Klemz (1981) both epitomise this approach. Both see the matching of needs and services as nonproblematic: there are x number of disabling conditions brought about by y causes; there is a legal and statutory framework, disabled people have a number of needs and there are these services provided to meet them. Such approaches ignore a number of crucial problems: What is 'need'? Are the services that are provided appropriate? Certainly Bell and Klemz (1981) show little awareness of the ways in which the feelings and aspirations of people with disabilities have changed radically.

If only social work with people with disabilities were as simple as this practical approach implies – the matching of resources to needs within a legal and statutory framework. It will be argued here that the dominant view of disability as a personal tragedy or disaster is an inaccurate one and may lead to the provision of inappropriate resources. It will further be suggested that social work as organised professional activity has either ignored disabled people or intervened on the basis of the dominant view of disability as a personal disaster. Chapter 1 will argue this at greater length and suggest a more appropriate theory of disability which will be referred to as the social model of disability and draw out some of its implications for practice.

This is not to assert the predominance of theory over practice but rather to suggest that there is a symbiotic relationship between the two: that theory will inform practice and orientate the activities of practitioners whose very activities will feed back and modify theory. This view is very close to what Kuhn (1962), in discussing the history and development of the natural sciences, called a 'paradigm'. A sub-title of this book might well be 'The Social Model of Disability – A Paradigm for Social Work', as originally noted by Mike Oliver.

Chapter 2 will then consider various ways of conceptualising disability and some of the implications that follow from these different conceptualisations. It will be suggested that the implication stemming from the individual model of disability is to count numbers of disabled people, compile registers and so on, whereas the social model suggests that ways need to be developed of measuring the disabling effects of the physical and social environment instead. Chapter 3 will focus on the relationship between impairment and disability in the context of social work practice with individuals, arguing that it is the task of social workers to be primarily concerned with reducing or alleviating the consequences of disability and not the problems of impairment.

Chapter 4 will widen the discussion and consider these issues in relation to social work practice with families where there is a disabled member. Chapter 5 will consider the role and functioning of residential and day-care facilities and will suggest that these services further disable impaired individuals. Suggestions as to how social work can attempt to prevent this imposition of additional disability will also be discussed.

Chapter 6 will consider the legal framework within which services are provided for disabled people, including the rights that disabled people have to access such services. Chapter 7 will pull together some of the issues raised in connection with the relationship of theory to practice and consider the implications both for service provision and professional practice that the social model of disability raises. It will review the progress made since this book was first published and, finally, some consideration will be given to ways forward into the next millennium.