



Complexity and social work theory and practice

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Most social workers, wherever they work, deal with complex life situations in their practice. If situations were not difficult in various ways or complex in their ramifications, people would often manage them without calling on help from a social worker. This paper focuses on the implications of the complexity of the situations that social workers deal with for the way in which they use theory in their practice. I argue that social work theory does not adequately guide social workers' practice in such complex situations. They need to incorporate a range of additional knowledge and skill to make good use of practice theory.

Yvonne (16) and John (11), the children of Catherine and Harry, are an example of the kind of complexity that many social workers face in their practice.

There were several break-ups between Catherine and Harry after Yvonne was born, partly caused by Harry's violence. The final break-up came just after her pregnancy with John was confirmed. Harry eventually went to live with another woman, whose children were considered at risk and removed from the home because of his violence. The local child protection

team continued to be involved, partly because of continuing contact with Harry, who was considered a risk.

Catherine brought up Yvonne and John largely on her own, but three years ago was diagnosed with cervical cancer. More recently, it became clear that she had only a few months to live, and arrangements for the children after her death needed to be planned. In law Harry would be entitled to resume parental responsibilities after Catherine's death, and he was not considered a safe parent.

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As Catherine became frailer, Yvonne remained at home with her mother. John increasingly stayed with Catherine's sister, Louise, and his cousins. The family's plan was that he would move there permanently when Catherine died, while Yvonne would stay in Catherine's home. During the last few weeks of Catherine's life, Harry, who had sporadic contact with the children, turned up at Catherine's home asking to see them. On two occasions he was drunk and contact was refused, but his attitude became more demanding as the weeks went on.

On the weekend of Catherine's death, Harry called, drunk again, at Louise's house in another town to try to see John. He sat outside in the car,

was threatening and had to be asked to leave by the police. Louise had no rights as a parent, but she and her husband were concerned about Harry visiting. The child protection responsibility for John was to transfer to the authorities in Louise's hometown, and a meeting was set up to transfer the case. However, Yvonne also explained to the social worker that she felt the need for protection if Harry visited the original family home.

The various strands of this situation highlight different aspects of social work practice. Among these strands are:

- the children's direct experience of marriage break-up and domestic violence in their lives from a young age
- John's experience of impending and actual separation from his sister and incorporation into another family, which is itself reforming to include him
- John's integration into a new school at a time of bereavement, and the consequences of this for his school and other pupils
- the children's recent experience of the death of a parent, probably the first major death of someone close to them in their lives
- the children's experience of threat from their father's behaviour, and their perceptions and understanding of these family dynamics
- Harry's issues with alcohol, and his emotional and social responses to parenthood in his two families
- the legal complexities of parental rights and responsibilities where children are protected by removal from or separation from their parents, and where family members take on parental responsibilities

- the responsibility of the social workers involved to assess and respond to the need and risk affecting various participants on behalf of the state
- the social work principle of engaging family members and finding respectful, open ways to do this, especially in the face of hostility or violence
- the complexity of trying to create safe contact between children and their non-custodial parent/s to maintain family relationships, identity and belonging
- the delicate balance of a strengths-based practice approach in child protection work while at the same time considering risks, needs, rights and wishes of all parties

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- Yvonne taking on independent responsibility for her own living arrangements and a house at the age of sixteen
- the administrative complexities of transferring responsibility for children at risk from one public authority to another
- the professional and administrative responsibilities for liaison about a complex family situation involving different public authorities and responsibilities.

This list of issues is not exhaustive but it reminds us that social workers deal both in making practical arrangements, and in the emotional and behavioural content of the situations. They are part of official and administrative systems and have to make them work. They also have to take into account the legal rights and duties that they have as professionals and officials, and those that their clients have as parents and citizens. For example, there is an informal arrangement between Catherine and her sister for John's care after her death that might be fine in many families, although it would usually

be better to confirm it through legal processes. However, this is inadequate in dealing with the complicated parental rights and behavioural difficulties in this situation.

Unlike Catherine's doctors and nurses, who mainly focused on her treatment and comfort as she approached death, the focus of social work is on the social systems of which individuals are a part. So social workers were involved with important social issues for several members of the family, and were responsible for making a variety of social systems work properly. For example, a thoughtful social worker would realise that John's bereavement at a young age might well have an emotional impact on his classmates at school that would need to be managed.

The complexity is of different kinds. Some of it arises because there are several individuals and family groups involved, some because a variety of social and behavioural issues are present, some because of a mixture of agencies and legal and official responsibilities. Social workers have to deal simultaneously with each of these different aspects of complexity.

Weaknesses in social work theory and knowledge

The assumptions of the theory and knowledge bases of social work do not fit complexity of this kind, even though it is commonplace in practice. This is one of the reasons that social workers often comment that the theory that they are taught on their courses is sometimes unhelpful when they reach full-scale practice. In education, while writing essays about the application of theory to practice, and in practice placements, it is possible to limit the range of factors that a practitioner deals with. There

are no such luxuries in full-time professional practice.

Practice theory is an aspect of social work theory concerned with how to do social work, in which ideas are developed to prescribe particular models of practice or ways of practising (Payne, 2005a). Practice theory tries to make sense of the work social workers actually do, and includes formal and informal sets of ideas. Formal practice theory is written, usually published, evidence and analysis worked out in a rational structured form. It offers general ideas that may be applied deductively to particular practice situations; that is, the ideas

are applied to the situation rather than the situation generating ideas.

Informal practice theory draws on ideas and experience gained in life and practice. It is applied

inductively, that is, the theory derives from particular situations and is generalised to other relevant practice situations. This requires decisions about similarities and differences between situations to decide if the generalisation is relevant. Practice theory is not the only form of social work theory: there are also theories about what social work is and of psychological and social knowledge about the client's world (Sibeon, 1990).

The assumption of evidence-based or research-aware practice is that fairly clear prescriptions for action can be identified from research, but this does not consider how these are mediated by official or legal responsibilities or agency function (Webb, 2001). Practice theory generally prescribes actions that take place with one client or family. Many practice theories such as task-centred practice, solution-focused work or cognitive behavioural practice presume a precise

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targeting of specific behaviours (Payne, 2005a). These systems of thought may give us ideas about a situation and organise a response that people can understand and accept. For example, task-centred practice helps practitioners and clients identify a series of tasks to be shared. Solution-focused work generalises successes in clients' lives to other issues where they are having difficulty. In both sets of ideas, this helps practitioners and clients.

While such theories may be helpful as part of practice, the situations practitioners work with are not the main focus of much social work practice theory. Because it defines the ideas that should be applied to a situation, it does not make provision for ideas to emerge from the situation that practitioners are dealing with. Therefore, it does not allow clients and others in the family system to develop and act on ideas about how they might be dealt with. Complex relationships between different family groups, all with a legitimate call on some aspects of social welfare provision, and the provision of packages of caring services lie outside most practice theory prescriptions. Practice theory also does not deal with working across several organisations with different roles and legal and administrative mandates.

Bringing knowledge and understanding together

Social workers therefore need more than practice theory to deal with complex situations. They need to bring the ideas and techniques that come from practice theory together with other aspects of social work knowledge

and understanding to incorporate a range of knowledge about the services and social environments in which they work. Pawson et al's (2003) work refers to:

- *organisational knowledge*, about government and agency organisation and regulation
- *practitioner knowledge*, drawn from experience of practice, which tends to be tacit, personal and context-specific
- *user knowledge*, drawn from users' knowledge of their lives, situation and use of services, including the views of children and young people
- *research knowledge*, drawn from systematic investigation disseminated in reports

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- *policy community knowledge*, drawn from administrators, official documentation and analysis of policy research.

Moreover, social workers bring this knowledge together to practice in ways that respond to their personal style of relating to people and forms of response determined by their agency and colleagues as appropriate to their roles. Among the less

well-specified elements of practice that may be relevant are:

- *caring*, which brings together two elements: a receptiveness and openness to clients' needs and interests and a proactive response to the understanding thus gained about clients and their situation, so that clients' personal development and control of their circumstances is enhanced (Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1984; Payne, 2008)
- *enhancing resilience*, improving the capacity of individuals and families to respond to the social issues that they face in their life (Oliviere and Monroe, 2007; Walsh, 2006)

- *emotional labour and intelligence*, responding in a way that is acceptable to the participants to their feelings and improving the participants' capacity to deal with the emotional stresses of their situation (James, 1993; Morrison, 2007)
- *support*, being prepared to stand alongside people as they work through what is happening to them (Sheppard, 2004)
- *process*, as a way of understanding the trajectory of events (Payne, 2005b).

Practice frameworks provide further opportunities to collate theory, research and knowledge types into conceptual guides for practice (Healy, 2005; Connolly, 2006). Social work supervision also provides an important mechanism for the exploration of these issues so that practice is informed in ways that strengthen good outcomes for children and their families.

Looking again at Yvonne and John's situation, the various social workers involved would need a great deal of organisational and practitioner knowledge about how the agencies and organisations need to be contacted, chased and supported to deal with the various problems the children face. Intervening in this situation would require active pursuit of the links to ensure that John and Yvonne were safe. The responsibility is splintered so much that practitioners could not assume that the cases would transfer between authorities cleanly; that Yvonne would be helped to deal with her bereavement in her new fairly isolated position, or that the police would intervene effectively to protect Yvonne in her mother's home; or that the school would be able to understand and deal with John's emotional

difficulties arising from his bereavement and his change of placement.

The family situation is so complex that practitioners would rely on family members to interpret behaviour and understand what would work in the various relationships. They could not solely rely on over-simplified assumptions about family or human development, although of course this knowledge would help them know what kinds of issues to raise questions about.

Understanding the process of what is happening for Yvonne and John in their bereavement and various losses would also be important. In this way, practitioners could work out how concerns would mount at the time of loss, and when

extra effort to help would be required. It would be important to be prepared to listen to the different concerns of the participants: John and Yvonne's losses and fears; Louise's anxieties about the impact of the bereavement and taking John into her family; and also Harry, since his behaviour may reflect rising

stresses and provide opportunity to facilitate some intervention to help him and secure relationships for Yvonne and John. Being prepared to act to help resolve particular issues as they arise is supportive because it means standing alongside people at a difficult time.

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Conclusion

I have argued that dealing with complexity requires more of social workers than following prescriptions of practice theory that may be too oversimplified to be useful in complex situations. Practice theory may be applicable to particular aspects of situations within the complexity of

people's lives. It may offer ideas about how to see the situation that clients are dealing with. However, social workers also need to call on a range of sources of knowledge and respond to the complexity in many of the situations that they deal with by analysing and understanding the process and trajectory of issues as they have arisen in clients' lives. They need to use that knowledge and theory in a caring, emotionally intelligent and supportive way with the aim of disentangling the various elements of a complex system and enhancing the resilience both of the people involved and the social and organisational systems that they are entwined with.

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