

Advocacy assignment

Sociology



Drawing on your current and previous social care experience, theoretical perspectives and knowledge acquired through the DPP2 module, present a discussion of your understanding of these concepts and, their relevance to your own developing professional practice. This assignment will examine the concepts of Advocacy, Partnership Working and Empowerment. It will firstly describe the three concepts individually and then, in order to examine the topic in more depth, scrutinise how the concepts link and are relevant to each other.

The complexities and tensions regarding these connections and how these may impact on service users, social workers and social care agencies will also be examined. Examples of professional working practice will be used throughout to demonstrate how theory is applied to practice. Advocacy can be described as acting on behalf of another person or group of people (Banks, 2001). This concept is especially important in social care because the client group is often unable to speak out for themselves, due to issues such as vulnerability, isolation or lack of family support networks.

Advocacy enables workers to empower service users by ensuring that their needs and rights are met, and by securing services that they are entitled to. It redresses the power imbalances by guaranteeing that the service user is involved with discussing options and negotiating agreements (Braye et al, 1998). An advocate's role is to comply with the wishes and instructions of the client and to keep them thoroughly informed throughout the process. Confidentiality and acting impartially are also critical in advocacy as the service users own desires are the most important factor (Thompson, 2001).

In my role as a Youth Offending Team Officer, I act as an advocate regularly. An example of this is when a young person is homeless and I act as an independent advocate by speaking out on behalf of my client. The legislation around young people and homelessness is complicated and often they are unaware of their legal rights. Because of this, they may attend the housing service alone and come away feeling that they did not get a desired result, but feel powerless and unable to argue their case, often due to a lack of confidence in their interpersonal skills (Braye et al, 1998).

In these instances, I will speak out on behalf of the young people that I work with. In doing this, I listen to their situation and what they want, and then advise them on what their rights are. On the young person's agreement, we will attend the housing service together or I will make phone calls on their behalf. As I have more experience in negotiating with services, and I am also confident about doing this, this enables the young person to voice their opinions and desires through me in order to get the services they require and are entitled to.

I also empower the young person by informing them of the law and their rights in relation to housing and other areas so that they are informed for future events. In this way, the young person is gaining in knowledge which will give them life skills enabling them to gain independence and autonomy for the future. It is important with advocacy that the power stays with the service user. It would be too easy to take control of the situation leaving the client unaware of what is happening and feeling more powerless than ever.

In order to avoid this, it is vital to ensure that advocacy is used as a tool of empowerment. This can be carried out by the advocate listening and acting in accordance with the client's wishes and instructions, and also by keeping them fully informed and acting impartially. Self advocacy is a term which describes people speaking up for themselves and asserting their rights. This can be done either alone or in a group with other people who have had similar experiences.

This is a form of assertion and empowerment, resulting in taking away some of the power from the professionals and allowing the individual to have autonomy by gaining some control over their lives. ' Advocacy signals the necessity to validate the experience of clients and patients and ensure that their rights, wishes and needs are met' (Adams et al, 2002, p. 207). Social Work should not focus on the service users presumed inadequacies but to the barriers which are placed in the way of them taking control of their lives. The focus should be shifted from charity and sympathy to advocacy and rights (Thompson, 2001)

In order for advocacy to be a justifiable part of social work, it is essential that the professional feels confident in the role and that adequate training and support have been provided by the agency (Trevithick, 2002). Some professionals do not have the confidence or the correct knowledge around the subject in order to advocate on a service users behalf and this can be detrimental to the process (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1998). There can be a danger when a professional advocates for a client, that the client is disempowered by the process.

This can be because the professional has taken over the situation and the client has lost the chance to learn to empower themselves, so it is essential that adequate and thorough training is provided in order to train workers who deal in advocacy (Dalyramble and Burke, 2003). Like other social work skills, Advocacy is a skill which can be learnt and which can be developed over time through experience and resulting confidence. Partnership Working

There are two forms of partnership working, one being with the service user and one being with other professionals as part of a multi-disciplinary approach.

It is regarded as good practice when a service has partnership working with both the client and other professionals. There are differences as to how partnership working is currently used in social care, for example, some agencies excel in working with clients and involve them as much as possible in the whole process, but make little progress in working with other professionals. By contrast, other agencies may work very effectively as part of a multidisciplinary network but have little partnership working with any of the clients themselves (Thompson, 2000).

An ideal to strive for is the balance between working with the client and other professionals in partnerships. A basic description of partnership working with service users would be working with clients, as opposed to doing things to or for them (Thompson, 2000). In partnership working, the client is seen as the 'expert' on themselves and therefore it is essential to involve them in all of the processes. This is in contrast to the medical model, where the professional is seen as the expert on the client and the client's health and the relationship is often paternalistic.

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However, this model too is changing with the onset of the information age and the 'expert patient' who is often very knowledgeable in regard to their own medical conditions. Good partnership working with other professionals is of great importance in order for services to be delivered well. The relationship between different agencies can sometimes be difficult as both parties are likely to have different priorities, expectations, obligations and concerns, so it is important that these are shared from the beginning to enable understanding. This then allows any issues to be dealt with in a positive and open manner (Thompson, 2000).

Thompson (2000) describes the term 'setting out your stall' as an important aspect in building partnerships with clients. He explains this as, being clear from the beginning as to why the professional is there, what their role is, what they expect from the client and what the client can expect from them. This allows the client to have clarity on the process without feeling left out of matters as things progress. This can work especially well where there is a conflict of interest, eg, in child protection cases, as any disputes can be discussed from the beginning.

Keeping clients informed and aware of any issues and changes in the situation empowers the client and provides autonomy. In order to work in partnership, it is important to keep communication channels open, by involving the service user and other professionals in decision making processes, such as during assessments, plans and reviews. Partnership working encourages a shared responsibility for resolution of the situation, ensuring that all parties feel that their contributions are important (Thompson, 2000).

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Plans should be based on negotiated agreement and not on prejudices or assumptions about client's behaviours and wishes. (Braye et al, 1998)

Service user's have the right to contribute to decisions that affect their lives and to know what professionals are saying about them (Trevithick, 2002).

This is essential for therapeutic working relationships built between care workers and service users based on mutual trust. Partnership does not necessarily mean that each participant has equal power, but that the distribution of power is openly discussed and recognised by all involved (Braye et al 1998).

However, even with an uneven allocation of power, the client should still have enough understanding to contribute to discussions and decisions and enough power to influence the outcome (Tunnard, 1991). Partnership working can be difficult for some service users, especially if they have felt powerless in the past from the result of previous service involvement. If this is the case, partnership will not succeed until work with the service user is completed to address the internalised oppression and the acknowledged belief system that goes with it (Braye et al, 1998).

Ways of tackling this can be self confidence sessions and by tracking where these negative beliefs first originated (Trevithick, 2002). Apologising for past agency mistakes can go a long way towards gaining the trust and respect of service users and for providing a 'clean sheet' on which to base new working relationships of mutual trust, understanding and respect. The Youth Offending Team (YOT) where I work is a multi-disciplinarily team with representatives from social services, probation, police, NHS, Lifeline Drug and Alcohol services, youth service and education.

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Working in this environment is advantageous because there is a wealth of experience from different backgrounds and this allows work with the young offenders to provide a holistic approach to social care and health. However, because the team is multi-agency, it could be argued that staff may become complacent about having good communication with other agencies that are not represented in the YOT. It is important for staff to be aware of this and to ensure that they make efforts to have good partnership working with all service providers by clear liaison and communication channels.

Empowerment Braye and Preston-Shoot (1995 p. 8) describe empowerment as 'increasing one's ability to take decisions, taking control of one's circumstances and achieving personal goals therefore maximising the quality of life and by enabling people who are disempowered to have a greater voice in matters that effect them'. This definition is centred around people taking control of their own lives and this whole concept implies structural change or the claiming of social rights for oppressed groups (Adams et al, 2002).

Empowerment is a widely used term that has a large variety of definitions yet one that is often questioned (Gomm, 1993).

Basically, it applies to the process of taking more control over your own life and situation. However, due to the amount of discrimination and oppression that may be experienced by social care clients, its use in social work is more complex. In this setting, it is not only a psychological process, but also a social and political one and involves assisting service users to tackle the social challenges that they face (Thompson 2000). This involves attempting to increase the power that clients have and to give them as much control as possible over their situation.

This is in direct opposition to creating dependency which keeps the service user out of the process. Examples of ways in which social workers can encourage empowerment are through resources, education, political awareness and self esteem counselling (Thompson, 2001). Empowerment can be seen as a way to achieve authenticity in the social care context, it is not a way of assisting service users to adjust to the restraints put on them but rather identifying ways to remove the obstructions that are in the way of their progress (Thompson 1998)

Empowerment can be considered as the right to apply choice and to take risks (Kemshall and Pritchard, 1996) This can sometimes clash with the social work practice of risk assessment, as this is a strategy to prevent undue hazard and danger and rarely takes into account empowerment and liberty (Ryan, 1996). Whilst a professional may work closely with one particular client and act as an advocate on their behalf, they must also take into consideration the rights of significant others. It is not always ethically sound to encourage the client's rights if this is to the detriment of other people who may be negatively affected by this (Banks, 1995)

In my role as a Youth Offending Team Officer, empowerment is an important factor. This can sometimes cause a conflict of interests, as the young people that I work with are subject to court orders and must attend sessions and complete the work set, otherwise they will be returned to court. Often the young people are not motivated to comply with the court order and do not want to undertake sessions; however, they are aware that breaching these orders may result in a custodial sentence.

It is important for Youth Offending Team Workers to have a balance between care and control. In order to empower the young people, I firstly meet with them for a thorough assessment. At this point, I will explain what the court order they are subject to entails. I will listen to the young person's feelings about the order and ask them what they would like to get out of it, we will then discuss between us what we feel the best way to successfully complete the order would be.

For example, part of an order may be that the young person must attend further education, I will then ask the young person what they are interested in, and together we will explore the various training providers that the young person might be keen to attend. These actions empower the young person as it gives them choices and they become involved in planning their own lives and futures.. Empowerment, however, is often argued as just a buzz word which creates a vogue image, creating protection against criticism (Mulender and Ward, 1991).

While Social Workers have statutory powers and the ability to refuse services, they will always be regarded as powerful by service users (Koprowska, 2006). This can cause tensions, unease and distrust in the minds of service users and it is the work of social carers to break down these possible barriers and build working relationships of mutual trust, understanding and respect. Advocacy, Partnership and Empowerment all compliment each other with empowerment being central to the other two (Trevithick, 2002).

They all revolve around the notion of power and the idea of the service user gaining more power, control and autonomy. Social Workers have a lot of power, due to their position of authority and their ability to access resources. In contrast to this, clients are often subject to different forms of discrimination, sometimes unwittingly undertaken by care workers themselves through unacknowledged prejudices and assumptions.. It is important for professionals to tackle this discrimination as opposed to reinforce it (Thompson, 2000). In order to work with service users in an empowering way, either in advocacy or partnership working, then the ability to compromise and negotiate are essential skills (Trevithick, 2002). In order for social care to be positive, it is important for service users to be seen as individuals who have essential contributions to make in relation to their personal situation and care. The social care worker must acknowledge the positive qualities of the service user and include their self perception of the situation and problem solving skills as opposed to simply acknowledging the problems they bring (Trevithick, 2002).

Phillipson (1993) argues that empowerment and equalising power imbalances is not enough, and that professionals should challenge the inequalities in society that cause the initial disproportion of power. However, how this can be fully achieved is unclear (Trevithick, 2002) although as it is the duty of the social worker to act on behalf of the client, this should include speaking out against discriminatory behaviour and speech. To listen or observe discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping without tackling this is tantamount to condoning this behaviour.

In conclusion, working with the concepts of advocacy, partnership working and empowerment, allows service users more choice around their own lives and thus autonomy. Although, there may be difficulties for both social workers and service users to share the power in certain situations, it is important that attempts are made and a workable balance achieved. This is an ongoing endeavour and the social worker should be ever vigilant for opportunities to empower clients in order that they are able to gain independence and achieve responsibility for their own situations and lives wherever possible.

This summary will look at the concepts of advocacy, partnership working and empowerment and their role in social care. Advocacy can be described as acting on behalf of another person or group of people. This is especially relevant to social care because many of the service users are unable to speak out for themselves due to issues such as vulnerability. Advocacy enables workers to give power to service users by ensuring that their needs and rights are met and by securing services that they are entitled to. It evens out the power imbalances by guaranteeing that the service user is involved in making decisions regarding their own life.

A basic description of partnership working would be working with clients, as opposed to doing things to or for them. Partnership working encourages a shared responsibility for resolving situations, and ensures that all parties feel that their contributions are important. Partnership does not necessarily mean that each participant has equal power, but that the distribution of power is openly discussed and recognised by all involved. Empowerment in the social

care setting, attempts to increase the power that clients have and to give them as much control as possible over their circumstances.

This is in direct opposition to creating dependency which keeps the service user out of the process. Empowerment can be considered as the right to apply choice and is central to both advocacy and partnership. Empowerment has a positive view towards service users, seeing them as competent to make decisions on their own lives when provided with the right resources. In conclusion, advocacy, partnership working and empowerment address the power imbalances that are prevalent in social care, by enabling clients to be part of discussions and decisions made about their lives.

Social workers should encourage the use of advocacy, partnership working and empowerment in order to promote independence for service users, so that they can achieve responsibility for their own situations and lives wherever possible. References Adams, R. , Dominelli, L. and Payne, M. (eds) (2002) *Social Work: Themes, Issues and Critical Debates*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan Banks, S (2001) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan Braye, S and Preshton- Shoot, M (1998) *Empowering Practice in Social Care*, Buckingham, Open University Press

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