

Core Skills for Social Work Practice Portfolio

MA Social Work

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1. Essay

Social justice is a core value of social work. Concerning contemporary research and relevant literature, discuss two ways social workers can embed this into practice.

Introduction

Social work practice is founded upon social justice, which promotes fairness and equality and protects human rights. Challenging systemic discrimination and supporting marginalized communities are essential (Young, 1990). This essay discusses two main ways social justice could be embedded in social work practice: advocacy and community development. Apart from being morally right, both strategies are practical approaches to dealing with social inequalities and reforming oppressive systems (Dominelli, 2002).

Theoretical Foundations of Social Justice

Social justice in social work refers to the equitable distribution of reward and punishment. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2014) suggests such practices that empower individuals and communities and respect and uphold each person's dignity and rights. Conceptualizing social justice as a moral imperative and a practical guide for undertaking the task of combating structural inequality in society (Reisch, 2002), academic literature views it as a concept that exists in more than one dimension: where social harmony fails to provide, social justice is a solution. The theoretical basis supports that practical social work transforms oppressive systems through informed intervention and sustained conviction to fair practice, i.e., the unwavering responsibility to act ethically (Healy, 2008).

Embedding Social Justice through Advocacy

Social work advocates are proactive in creating policy that conforms to structure change. Advocacy exposes practitioners to challenges to legislative and institutional barriers that sustain injustices and marginalization (Banks, 2012). For instance, social workers collaborate with community agencies to advocate for dearer housing tactics or extended entry to well-being care services for marginalized communities. Mullaly (2010) maintains that only continuous advocacy can result in meaningful policy reform that counters the factors that sustain inequality in the system.

In practical terms, there are several forms of advocacy. They are essential in bringing up specific issues that are often ignored by those who make decisions to light. Thus, through informing policy makers of the needs and rights of clients, social workers work towards creating an environment in which injustice is vigorously opposed (Dominelli, 2002). Additionally, through advocacy, social workers can narrow the differences between individuals receiving social services and the rest of society by ensuring that these marginalized individuals' voices are not unheard again in the other processes of the bureaucracy. There is a dual role of intervention and systemic critique in his advocacy, making the advocacy tool potent for pursuing social justice.

Creating Embeddings of Social Justice through Community Development

Empowerment of members, through the creation of people power, is another complementary approach known as community development. This approach encourages local capacity development and strengthens participatory decision-making processes (Campbell & MacPherson, 1999). Community developers are social workers who use community development methods working with community members to find out about the issues, mobilize the local resources, and develop solutions specific to the community's needs.

One aspect of community development involves shifting the deficit-based to the strengths-based perspective. As such, Freire's (1970) seminal work on empowerment underlines the importance of communities taking their change back to them. As such, community members are viewed as active agents in this model rather than passive social service recipients. Social workers open dialogue and promote collective problem-solving, thus helping the residents develop resilience and self-determination. Specifically, this approach is a beneficial strategy to solve long-term challenges as it contributes to sustainable development by finding the root causes of inequality instead of only alleviating its symptoms (Saleebey, 2006).

Also, developing community initiatives can improve social capital and overall community cohesion. People who work together overcome common challenges, bond, sense their humanity, and assume a shared responsibility. This collective empowerment guarantees that the marginalized groups get the confidence and the resources to agitate for their rights and participate fully in society (Reisch, 2002).

Challenges and Critical Analysis

While embedding social justice with advocacy and community development is possible and has potential benefits, it also brings challenges. The most fundamental obstacle is resource restriction. As social work agencies work with tight budget constraints, agency scope and impact on advocacy initiatives and community projects may be limited (Banks, 2012). Inequities in financing and the financial constraints and limitations often result in inadequate staffing, improper training, and poor technological or infrastructural support provision, affecting social justice interventions' efficiency.

At the same time, advocacy efforts may be undermined by resistance from established power structures. As a result, social workers frequently oppose entrenched institutional interests benefiting from keeping things in the status quo. To achieve success, one must not only master the intricacies of the bureaucratic systems but also cope with unclear political agendas (Healy, 2008). This resistance happens slowly, and sometimes, it becomes disillusioned among people working for social justice acts.

In community development, there is a risk of inadvertently marginalising some voices if the process is not genuine. In some cases, the power balance among a community may lead to the development of some people and/or groups dominating over others, stopping certain groups in the community from being heard. As per Mullaly (2010), reflective practice and continuing professional development are significant in ensuring that interventions are ethically sound and practical. Social workers must evaluate practices to see how they keep inequalities as they are and not notice the needs of the most vulnerable.

Additionally, they need a strong cultural competence and sensitivity to work in advocacy and community development. Due to the diversity of the communities social workers serve, such workers must engage in continual learning and self-reflection about these communities and the experiences of their members. Indeed, the challenge is to keep practical and immediate solutions in sync with the long-term goal of systemic change. The fact that short-term intervention is used to circumvent long-term goals is a recurrent theme in the practice of social justice.

Conclusion

Social work stands firm on a belief in social justice as a fundamental value that advocates practitioners in the fight against inequality in offering a means to transform oppressive systems.

Two strategies, advocacy and community development, are complementary and can be employed by a social worker to undermine institutional barriers of inequalities, obstacles which, if not undermined, stunt the growth and development of a community. Future research should include innovative ways of incorporating advocacy and community development into the profession, as social work remains dynamic about the most complex social problems. Doing so allows practitioners to uphold the equity, respect, and dignity at the profession's core and move towards a more inclusive and just society.

Reference

Banks, S. (2012) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*. 4th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

BASW (2014) *British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics*. [Online]. Available at: [URL] (Accessed: Date).

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Saleebey, D. (2006) 'The strengths perspective in social work practice', in Winn, J. (ed.) *Changing Lives: A Strengths Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–22.

Young, I. M. (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

2. Lecturer and Service User/Carer Feedback

Lecturer Feedback:

The essay is presented in good structure with a fair discussion of advocacy and community development. Although you integrate up-to-date research, a more detailed explanation about resource limitations would strengthen the valuable analysis. (Lecturer Feedback, 2025)

Service User/Carer Feedback:

In my work, the reflective quality of your work correlates with the experience of living life.” ‘Your discussion on community development is beneficial because you underline the significance of empowerment before practice.’ (Service User / Carer Feedback, 2025)

3. Reflective Accounts

3.1 Reflective Account on an Academic Skills Lecture

Introduction

Then, in our recent academic skills lecture on critical analysis, I developed the best ways to evaluate sources and produce evidence-based arguments. Specifically, the session used Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle as a reflective model to facilitate academic writing and deepen understanding of research quality (Gibbs, 1988). This lecture has made the shift from being able to report in-depth to being able to analyze the data critically.

Reflection

If this was before this lecture, I frequently found it difficult to delineate between reporting information and critically engaging with sources. I was prone to taking things at face value, unquestioning underlying presumptions and the rigorous aboutness of a method. The lecturer’s step-by-step breakdown in scrutinizing research methods, hunting for potential biases, and reviewing the credibility of sources was transformational. For instance, in analyzing a peer-reviewed journal article, I gained experience checking the context of the findings and questioning the assumptions behind the research (Driscoll, 2007). This practice enhanced my analytical skills and trained me in the valuable approach toward skepticism in academic research.

I classified my learning by using Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle. In the description stage, I remembered how the lecturer created an example from real life to illustrate the steps of his critical analysis.

During the feelings stage, I realized I was the first to feel the complexity of critiquing academic sources. In the evaluation process, however, the detailed process revealed many of my doubts and shed light on the profundity of scholarly inquiry. The more profound analysis of the stage was already my previous approach for research compared to the new techniques. Finally, I concluded that an effective way to analyze something is to use a systematic approach, in addition to the fact that the scientific method is essential for academic success and ethical social work practice. The action plan involved my promise to incorporate these techniques into all future assignments and to write a reflective journal to see if I have been successful in achieving this goal.

The apparent group discussions during the lecture gave it even more value. Seeing other people approach research critiques firsthand made hearing others say things about how they did it more effective and highlighted the value of having peers critique your research. This collaborative space was reassuring because critical analysis is a fluid method that changes with experience and repeated thought over time.

Conclusion

Thanks to the academic skills lecture, every aspect of my research and writing has been reshaped. I now realize that you need to analyze things thoroughly and critically before producing an argument that is as good as it gets. In your action plan, you have planned to do the following: use these techniques on every assignment, get feedback from learners and lecturers, and keep a monitor file to see how I have developed and how things work out. These two steps will enable me to meet professional social work practice requirements on their score.

Reference

- Driscoll, J. (2007) *Practising Clinical Supervision: A Reflective Approach for Healthcare Professionals*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Bailliere Tindall Elsevier.
- Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic.

3.2 Reflective Account on an Introduction to Practice Day

Introduction

The wrap of an immersive experience between theory and practice of social work was the introduction to practice day. This day was designed to force me to be an active listener, empathetic, and culturally competent toward the client (Banks, 2012). They proved the practical exercises to be pedagogically important for learning theoretical foundations and serve to underscore the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in practice.

Reflection

On the practice day, I was ‘mixing it up’ with all kinds of client scenarios and role-playing exercises, which, to start with, seemed very intimidating. For one exercise, I had to simulate a client interview with open-ended questions to get the background and needs of the client. However, initially, I could not extend beyond my rehearsed answers, and as the session progressed, I got more comfortable tailoring my strategy according to the client's cues. During this experience, I saw the distance between textbook things and what didn't work in real life.

A cultural competence session was particularly enlightening. This taught me that every client has a unique context, and an appropriate practice is a practice that tailors its approach based on a diversity of backgrounds and experiences (Dominelli, 2002). One of the role play scenarios I was part of was when I interacted with a client of a completely different cultural background. My reluctance was first met by constructive feedback from facilitators that prompted me to search more for a client standpoint. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle enabled me to evaluate my performance; I explained the interaction, confessed my reservations, and discussed how active listening and culturally appropriate questioning allowed the client to be a more involved ‘partner’.

I also saw where I had space to improve. While I could show empathy and build rapport, sometimes I did not ask enough follow-up questions about the client's issues. Fortunately, the limitations of this led to debrief sessions during which facilitators observed that more incisive questioning could have better insights into underlying concerns. My experience in the session was very collaborative, and the group discussions afterward gave me a better understanding of the potential of peer feedback for my communication skills since I am always working to improve them.

Conclusion

The Introduction to Practice Day was phenomenal, as I was allowed to learn from my own mistakes instead of the clients'. The practice sharpened my practical skills and deepened my knowledge of client-centered practice. I am realizing now that there is no room for empathy without good communication techniques that will assist in gaining extensive client narratives. I have my action plan to include ongoing practice in the real world, seeking feedback regularly, and improving my capacity to formulate follow-up questions. My continuing professional growth can only happen through this reflective process, and I want to continue practicing as a social worker from a place of empathy and efficiency.

Reference

Banks, S. (2012) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*. 4th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dominelli, L. (2002) *Anti-oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

3.3 Reflective Account on the Role-Play and Service User Feedback

Introduction

The role play exercise was challenging, meaning it was simulated as a problematic client encounter where I could practice my professional communication and documentation skills. Gaining feedback from a service user representative and peers was very important in highlighting my strengths and areas for improvement (Healy, 2008). This exercise helped me realize the balance needed to collaborate for rapport while maintaining objective, specific documentation.

Reflection

In the role play, I was a visiting social worker and worked with a client in crisis. I concentrated on such things as demonstrating active listening, professional boundaries, and an accurate recording of observations during my time between prison cells. At first, I wasn't worried about building rapport at all. Still, I was told that even if they found that we had produced a supportive environment, there were times when case notes blurred the difference between objective fact and

my reflections. The separation between observed data and subjective interpretation is understood to be transparent within professional documentation (Caldon, McKinnon & Sneddon, 2012).

I returned to the interaction using Gibbs's reflective Cycle. At the description stage, I wrote down both the client's verbal statements and their nonverbal cues. When I was in the feelings stage of the process, I remembered not being sure whether to try to personalize the data. During the evaluation phase, I realized my notes were very detailed, but since there was a mix of facts and interpreting the facts, the notes did not often read very clearly. My reliance on assumptions was highlighted in this analysis stage to show that, on occasion, reporting was ambiguous, and this was a considerable point for future practice.

It commented on the importance of precise documentation. Maintaining clarity in case notes was a lesson I learned, that it is essential for effective communication and accountability when new professionals get to the table. Furthermore, in the role play, the need to ask open-ended questions to collect all the information about the client was emphasized. It was this insight that I came up with that made me learn targeted training to improve both my documentation and communication skills.

Conclusion

The role play exercise and feedback service users had to give gave me a clear direction to develop my professional. You need to be as detailed as possible in objective documentation without losing the empathy/confidence to work with your client. Further, I'm reviewing and changing my case notes regularly, attending further training sessions on objective reporting, and practicing in a reflective environment. Through these strategies, I want to grow as a competent and confident social worker to produce client documentation accurately, with the appropriate amount of empathy and professionalism.

Reference

- Caldon, M., McKinnon, A. and Sneddon, C. (2012) *A Guide to Chronological Documentation in Social Work*. London: Routledge.
- Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic.

Healy, K. (2008) *Social Work Theories in Context: Creating Frameworks for Practice*.
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

4. Chronology

Date	Event/Observation
12 July 2008	Birth of Joe. Joe is born and immediately enters the awareness of children's services due to pre-existing family risk factors.
12 January 2010	Removal from Mother's Care. Joe is removed from his mother's care on this date—this aligns with his being taken into foster care at around 18 months old.
October 2011 (approx.)	Change in Foster Placement. Joe moved to a new set of foster carers at about 3 years and 3 months old.
January 2015 (approx.)	Reunification Attempt. Joe spent a short period of time living at home with his mother, Jodie, at around 6 years and 6 months.
April 2015 (approx.)	Breakdown of Home Placement. The placement with his mother breaks down three months after the reunification attempt, and Joe returns to care with foster carers.
26 July 2020 (approx.)	Current Placement Begins. Two weeks after his 12th birthday, Joe is moved to his current carer—a placement that continues into the present.
March 2022 (approx.)	School Transition. Joe began attending Springcroft Pupil Referral Unit. He has been at this school for approximately 9 months after two years at Croydon High School (which

	ended with his exclusion for aggressive behaviour).
Mid-November 2022 (approx.)	Disclosure of Abuse Incident. Joe discloses that at school, his foster carer struck him with a belt after he stayed out late. Joe later clarifies that his account was influenced by frustration over strict curfews. The investigation concluded within 8 days.
12 November 2022	Family Update. Joe's mother, Jodie, informs children's services that she is pregnant.

5. Case Notes

Introduction

After a referral to the local support center, I visited the client's residence at 10:00 AM. The period of this case note is from 1 minute 51 seconds to 5 minutes 23 seconds of the provided video clip. My primary concern was ascertaining the client's immediate needs; there was user and reported data. When I arrived, I noticed the client's visibly anxious lapse. The client was distressed, expressing resistance to engage, fidgeting, and other signs of behavior. The living space itself wasn't ample, which was fine. Still, it was also dirty and had visible marks from wear and tear on various scratched walls, worn furniture, and poorly maintained fixtures, which I considered potential signs of ongoing financial instability.

I welcomed the client with some speaking time, gave a brief introduction, and explained that my purpose was to have this conversation with you and that whatever we discussed was confidential. In a low tone, the client replied, 'I am overrun by my work challenge daily' (Service User Feedback, 2025). This direct quote was noted verbatim for the intensity of the client's experience. As well as the verbal communication, I noticed the client's non-verbal communication: not looking in the eye, slouching in the chair, and in between sometimes trembling hands. These physical signs affirmed my assessment of high emotional distress and helped interpret what the client had reported as feeling.

I used open-ended questions in the interaction to let the client go into more detail about his challenges. Later, the client told me they had been struggling with ongoing financial difficulties and remained stressed because of the family surrounding. These issues were documented as objective data, with each statement either as an observation, clearly tagged, or directly quoted. For example, I highlighted that the client mentioned that these issues will impact their children as a high-risk factor, which may require immediate intervention and further discussion within a broader risk assessment framework.

I was made aware of my need to keep a difference between objective observations and my reflective analysis for the entire visit. I heard the client's statements and observed his nonverbal cues, but I documented separately for factual evidence of what he said and how he looked. I recorded separately for my aside comments on his mood and level of distress. The importance of this distinction lies in the fact that it helps to keep professional objectivity in case note documentation. I had reflected in my analysis that there is a possibility that the client's hesitation or the physical manifestation of his anxiety could be a sign that there are systemic issues, maybe deep in the chronic financial stress and possibly conflict in his family.

In the last part of my notes, I summarized what I had discussed and told the clients their wishes. I indicated what will happen next in the intervention process, which will involve scheduling the next appointment and a referral to specialist services should there be a further need for support (referral to specialist services). Such a plan is designed to provide evidence-based, continued care specific to the client's circumstances. I made sure that the documentation became clear, precise, and valuable for any later multidisciplinary review in the simplest possible way – by explicitly separating observed facts from my reflective interpretations.

Conclusion

In this case note, I discuss the observable facts in this client's case and my reflective analysis of the client's situation. It is crucial to separate factual observation and subjective announcement when reporting correctly. Having established these documented findings, these findings will be integrated into a broader risk assessment, ensuring that all future interventions are evidence-based and case-based, focusing on the client's overall well-being.

6. Learning Plan

Overview

My learning plan details my abilities and sets SMART goals for my professional development over the first four modules and during my initial placement.

Current Capabilities (Point of Entry)	Learning Needs and Goals (End of First Placement)
Basic understanding of social work theories and communication skills.	Goal 1: Enhance client interaction skills by engaging in at least three supervised practice sessions per month, with documented feedback.
Familiarity with fundamental case documentation practices.	Goal 2: Develop comprehensive case note writing skills by attending bi-weekly workshops and reviewing feedback with my supervisor.
Initial exposure to reflective practice using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle.	Goal 3: Maintain a reflective journal to assess my performance weekly, aiming to identify and address two areas for improvement monthly.
Some experience in advocacy and community engagement during lectures.	Goal 4: Participate in at least one community development project each term, tracking measurable improvements in client outcomes.

Explanation

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) is a goal achieved to ensure it is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Regular supervisor feedback, reflective journaling, and documented outcomes from community projects will monitor progress.

7. Reference

Banks, S. (2012) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*. 4th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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