

Research

Title

The impact of systemic practice on families and practitioners.

Introduction

Following the death of Peter Connelly (DH, 2010a) inspections have illustrated the need for social workers to rediscover their core skills of assessment, so that decision making and planning are based on a sound analysis and understanding of each clients unique personality, history and circumstances. Munro confirms that a systems perspective offers the most holistic tool for undertaking informed assessment work that takes into full account the influencing family experience. Government guidance is recognising the importance of a therapeutic dimension to contemporary practice. It has long been established that social workers' own therapeutic skills need to be seen as a resource that must be used and offered in assessment work (DH, 2000a). This has been repeated by Munro as recently as 2011. (Walker, 2012, pp.7).

The aim of the research was to look how systems theory can inform simple practice changes that can make a difference to children. Specifically it was to look at the impact of systemic practice on families and practitioners. The research pilot targeted three families whom are all allocated to different practitioners. The practitioners then used basic systemic principles with the families over five sessions. The impact of this has then been evaluated through a focus group with the practitioners and through individual meetings with different family members using a loosely structured interview guide.

Background

The earliest reference describing systems theory and social work goes back to the 1970s (Forder, 1976). "Systemic thinking conceptualised that individual personality and identity could change along with changes in family dynamics." (Walker and Akiser 2004, pp3) From these first principles, systemic practice has continued to evolve. There does however continue to be a variety of definitions which try to define systemic practice. It is perhaps due to the loose categorisation or lack of a definition even within literature that has caused confusion amongst practitioners about what systemic practice actually means. Nick Child's (1998) definition is probably one of the most straight forward explanations.

"In practice, good family therapy is good systemic practice and is good social work. They're all about relationships and communicating and positive functioning in systems. They're all about good 'systemic practice' – bringing out, sharing and respecting everyone's views and stories, while integrating a way forward."

The Edinburgh City Systemic Family Therapy Team describes a systems approach as being:

“A systems approach is to work with families by focusing on the whole family as a functioning unit; it is a way of working which is concerned with what goes on between people and their environment. The focus of work is on the context in which problems occur and how they are maintained.”

Young people, adults and families working with professional agencies bring to the work their own patterns of behaviour based on their unique experience of life and beliefs in their other family and other systems. The task of the practitioner is to gain an understanding of belief systems, functions of behaviour and consider a range of interventions, which would be most appropriate to that particular situation. Changes to a family system can often be unpredictable particularly in social work where family support or child protection measures are in place.

The Munro Report (2011) has had an impact within City of Edinburgh Council. In addition to the Edinburgh City Systemic Family Therapy Team, a variety of specialist teams have been recruited to work with a spectrum of families in need. The teams use a systemic and behaviourist approach and aim to improve outcomes for families. I have always had an interest in systemic practice which stems back to when I was a social work student. I do not believe that we need specialist teams to do this work. I believe that good practitioners have the skills to do systemic work and as the Munro report highlights that social work needs to get back to basics and do the direct work with families.

Within social work in England, a systemic unit model has been developed in Hackney and is more commonly known as the “Hackney Model” or “Reclaiming Social Work”. It has changed the structure of the children and families practice team to create small units or teams which work systemically. Crucially these changes came at no great cost. The model has developed beyond Hackney and is being used in other local authorities. There have been cultural shifts within these local authorities in that the whole organisation has become more systemic in its practice and functionality. The findings are really positive. Forrester et al, 2013 carried out an evaluation on three local authorities using this model. One of researchers commented that “if we were starting child protection from scratch and comparing the local authority one approach and conventional children’s services, there is no question that you would opt for the systemic unit model.” At the heart of this is the joint allocation in small teams. This ensures that the unit is a genuine team with a shared purpose, rather than a group of workers each with their own cases. The evaluation concludes that what is important about the systemic unit model is not the model itself but the fact that it opens up a different way of delivering Children’s Services. When developing the approach the originators- Steve Goodman and Isabelle Trowler – started off by asking some relatively simple questions such as: “How do we want our social workers to help people?” and “How should the organisation support workers to do these things?”. The evaluation suggests that the systemic unit model is an innovative and effective way of developing a service that addresses such questions.

Aim

The aim of the research was to assess the impact of adopting a systemic approach on both families and practitioners involved with the North children's practice team.

Questions

The following questions were used with the practitioners in a focus group.

- 1a. What was different about meeting with the family as a whole.
- 1b If the family were here, how do you think that they would respond to the same question?

- 2a. What has changed in the family since July 2013.
- 2b. What would the family say to this question?

3. What changes have you recognised in how you think about your work?
The biggest challenge
The best learning

The following questions were used as a loose interview guide with the families.

1. What has helped in the work you have been doing recently with.....
2. What would you say is different about this way of working?
3. You may have started to notice small changes in your family... can you say anything about this e.g. changes in relationships? Your understanding of one another? Communication in your family?
4. What would you have liked more of? Liked less of?

Systemic Practice Methods

Three practitioners and families volunteered for the research pilot. The practitioners involved in this pilot were not all social work trained and have differing levels of experience. One of them was more familiar with systemic practice than others. It was important that everyone was at the same standard before beginning the work with the families. Senior Trainer Karry Richardson is a member of the City of Edinburgh Systemic Team. As such she has undergone training in systemic practice and family therapy and has extensive experience in systemic practice. She has therefore played a crucial role in this study in supporting and guiding the practitioners and me. In accordance with the principles of systemic practice, the training was delivered to the practitioners as a group and a group supervision model was used for the follow up sessions. Given the time limits of this study, it was decided to give the practitioners a very simplistic overview of systemic practice and the key principles of systemic practice which are outlined as follows:

The parts of the family are interrelated.

One part of the family cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the system.

Family functioning cannot be fully understood by simply understanding each of the parts separately.

A family's structure, organisation and belief systems are important factors that determine the behaviour of family members. This is a crucial element for practitioners to understand.

The training session also explored systemic methods of assessing and intervening with families. For example, (McGoldrick, Gerson and Shellenberger, 2009) have found that one of the most effective ways to gain an understanding of how the emotional system operates within a family system is a genogram. The genogram can enable users to identify patterns of behaviour and dysfunctions, which need to be addressed. As part of the training, one of the practitioners did a genogram on their own family. This was a very powerful experience for the group and the practitioner. It enabled the practitioner to share information that they mightn't have shared if other assessment tools were used.

Project Methods

The families were given a leaflet (designed by me) by the practitioner explaining to them about the research pilot. All the families that were selected by the practitioners agreed to participate in the pilot. The practitioners were then given support in devising a plan for their families using a systemic approach. Again the plans were very simplistic and not too prescriptive. Five sessions were planned with the family. Whilst it had been planned that group supervisions would take place after session three and five, it did not quite happen like this. This was primarily to do with the fact that this study took place over the summer period and the families involved missed some of the planned sessions. Two group supervisions did take place, but the timings of these were different for all involved. For example, one of the practitioners was delayed in starting due to being on holiday.

Ethics

My employer, the City of Edinburgh Council have consented and supported me in undertaking this research. By doing so, they have allowed me access to the families whom have been selected for this pilot. The families were given a written leaflet outlining the purposes of the research pilot and what was entailed for them by participating in it. In conjunction with data protection, the families have been kept anonymous and it is has not been relevant to discuss the specific details of their family situation within this research. All notes taken during this pilot have been kept secured in a locked filing cabinet. As has already been outlined, the families have not been randomly selected; their details and information has been shared with the practitioners participating in this research pilot. As employers of the City of Edinburgh Council, we are registered with the Scottish Social Services Council and as such need to adhere to their codes of practice.

Findings

The key differences identified by the practitioners were that using a genogram was beneficial as it offered a different perspective. They also felt that using tools such as a genogram and time line helped parents to tell their own story, encouraged them to reflect on their own experiences, their own values and beliefs and how that impacts on

the here and now. The practitioners also believed that this caused greater transparency between the families and them. One practitioner described it as being “a nicer way of working.”

Strengths	Challenges
<p>Focuses on the people rather than the problems</p> <p>Revealed more supports than what was initially perceived.</p> <p>Raised awareness for parents and helped them to reflect on what their own triggers are.</p> <p>Helped to re-establish a more effective working relationship, because of its' strengths based approach, it left parents feeling less defensive.</p> <p>Feel more relaxed going in with this approach-more freeing-it's their agenda.</p> <p>Should be using a systemic approach from the onset-before crisis.</p> <p>Celebrate what's going well-shift your own mindset to focus on the strengths.</p> <p>Family sharing a different perspective and knowing what's going on.</p> <p>Good to take step back and reflect on the process together (peer supervision).</p> <p>Reminder of existing skills.</p> <p>Enhanced own learning on different cultures/ belief systems.</p> <p>The benefits of active listening- the energy it takes.</p> <p>Focusing on the people rather than the problems.</p>	<p>Felt that the study was too restrictive in terms of time limits.</p> <p>Felt that they could have benefited with more time as it took a while to get the work started with the families.</p> <p>Frustrations around regarding the competing demands of the job in regards to writing reports, managing a large caseload and crisis situations.</p>

As the table above evidences, there are a lot more positives than negatives and all the practitioners felt that they had learnt a lot from the experience. They felt by using a systemic approach you can have a different type of relationship with parents and families, where there is less focus on difficult issues and more time spent looking at the bigger picture. They believe that families get a lot more out of it, that families are “much calmer afterwards in comparison to when we’re focusing on negatives.” They felt that it was a reminder to them that protected time is invaluable. Whilst one of the practitioners felt that they already thought systemically, they believe that this study had allowed them to more consciously consider the needs of the whole family.

All of the practitioners did encounter problems in regards to the sessions that they had planned with the families. Practitioner 1 had real difficulty engaging with family 1. There have been ongoing issues with family 1 not engaging with social work and it was hoped that by using a different approach may have changed this. As they did not engage at any level, Practitioner 1 was unable to undertake any of the planned work that they had hoped to. I have also tried unsuccessfully to meet with this family to gain their feedback about the pilot project and crucially why they haven’t engaged with this. Practitioner 1 has however been using a systemic approach with another family and feels that this has been of benefit. They are keen to further develop their skills in using a systemic approach and intend to continue to use it to underpin their practice.

Practitioner 2 managed to do three planned sessions with family 2. The planned sessions were designed to promote and support a mother and daughter relationship where there were some chronic difficulties. The daughter only engaged in the first session which was to complete a genogram. The mother did engage in further sessions with Practitioner 2. The genogram helped Practitioner 2 gain a further understanding of the family dynamics. The genogram helped the mother and daughter speak about their relationships with different family members within their family. It also helped the mother to discuss her own experiences of being parented. The mother and daughter do not think that this type of intervention has made any difference to their family situation. The mother is however not sure what would.

Practitioner 3 managed to do a planned session with family 3. They had wanted to meet with the family together but this did not happen. They met and completed a genogram with the father. Further sessions have been planned with the family but have not taken place at the time of writing this report. The mother believes that the family work well together but that there could be an improvement in regards to the professional support or system around the family. They felt that it was not co-ordinated and that there was a lack of communication between professionals. They felt that Child’s Planning meetings should be more family/ child centred rather than being education focused. They feel that the child should not be excluded from attending their own meetings in school which has been the case up to now. The parents remain committed to working with social work however would like some more practical help in regards to supporting their child. This leaves me curious as to whether they would have been able to express this had the practitioner used a more typical linear/ problem saturated approach?

Conclusion

There have been many limitations in respect of this study. The study took place over the summer period which has been problematic due to the practitioners taking annual leave at different times. The short timescales have felt restrictive. The practitioners were given very basic training on systemic working. Further training would have been done had this study taken place over a longer period. For the practitioners involved, they feel that they are still at the starting point of the work with the families. All the practitioners that participated in this study want to continue to try and work in a systemic way and are keen to further develop their knowledge and understanding of systemic practice. They all feel that this is a better way of working with families. What we haven't been able to measure through this study is whether using a systemic approach is a more effective intervention with families. Whilst the practitioners feel that is a better way of working with families, there is no evidence from this study to indicate that it is more effective. The two families that were interviewed did not feel that it had made any difference to their family situation, but given some of the endemic problems around it was unlikely that anything was going to change after a couple of sessions. Had this study taken place over a longer period like six months and the sample group had been bigger, I believe that the results would have been different. What has shifted perhaps is the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and the family and hopefully this creates a basis from which to effect change.

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