

On the Use of ICTs to Support Social Intervention among Asylum Seekers – Reported Cases from a Women’s Resource Centre in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on cases encountered during an internship on social intervention while working with the asylum seekers/refugees in Ireland. Comprehensive information is provided on the way in which intervention services were rendered, accomplished and reflect on the methods used. The efficacies of the method used which was based on personal experience, knowledge and systems theories are discussed extensively. Reflections that can be used to make adjustments when faced with similar situation in future are provided based on the experiences accumulated during the placement. Finally, the value of social care work within the framework of social care process is critically explored by linking theory to practice. The paper concludes by providing insights on how ICTs can be used to reinforce social inclusion and provide suggestion for ICT-based social intervention practices.

Keywords: Asylum Seekers, Intervention. ICTs, Social Care.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Abraham Maslow and others scholars identified people’s needs as falling into five broad categories: social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual (Ward and Rose, 2002). While some service users may be able to meet some of these needs by themselves, they may also require some form of help or ‘intervention’ with some aspect of their lives” (Share & Lalor. 2009 p.228).

The practice placement took place in a Women’s Resource Centre. The agency provides free support services to women at risk, by empowering them in various skills. They also link-up with other agencies to provide adequate support to their services users. Among other people expending the service are the asylums seekers/refugees especially women. The agency has a policy of not turning anyone away thus giving men also the opportunity to use the service at times.

This practice placement provided ample opportunities to work first hand with minorities, that is, immigrants and the asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are the people who left their country to Ireland seeking to be recognised as refugees according to the terms of the 1957 UN Convention (Coinsidine & Dukelow 2009). One of the main thrusts of the agency services is to make provision to meet the needs of people in general by providing necessary resources such things include internet access, use of telephone, photocopy machine, stationeries also feeding less privileged to mention few. Having put the above in place, the agency welcome people from different culture and background to come in and use the resources. As they come in to use the resources they also share their personal problems with member of staffs for necessary support.

2. ASSYLUM SEEKING IN IRELAND

According to Coinsidine & Dukelow (2009), the system for seeking asylum in Ireland is extremely negative to human life. In the same vein, O’Connor (2003a, p.40 cited in Coinsidine & Dukelow 2009) posited that asylum seeking in Ireland leaves the asylum seekers bored, isolated, socially excluded and impoverished.

The researcher also mention that many asylum seekers are underprivileged of public services, they are not aware of their entitlements, demoralised, deskilled and institutionalised in a way that is injurious and violates their fundamental human rights. My experience as an immigrant supports these positions, lending credence to the fact that being an immigrant is gloomy and boring. Having assess these needs based on the foregoing, it is obvious that people in this category needs the support of social care professionals to find protection and enablement for them to reach their full potential.

3. SOCIAL CARE PROFESSIONALS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS ROLE IN CONTEXT

To fulfil the value of social care profession it is important to build relationship with service users. Lishman (2007) said relationship with service user is necessary but not enough to change their situation. It is only important to pave way for effective support and help, since the purpose of my intervention is mainly to support, protect and provide necessary help that will encourage inclusion and integration for the immigrant, this concept was applied in during my internship. I therefore went further to discuss with my supervisor for permission to provide language training in English language by organizing English language lessons since the agency offer training on different courses per time to address integration and other issues of life. To be

effective in my job delivery as a social care worker, it is essential for me to seek the approval and co-operation of the service users to make the job easy and to actualise the set goal of my intervention. Having highlighted the service users' needs in the above areas, on my own part, displaying genuineness, empathy and absolute positive respect which I felt is the best to gain positive relationship with them (Miller 2006). Research has suggested that empathy, warmth and genuineness are particularly important to people when working with them. Moreover, for ethical and social care practice reason the service user's consent and involvement was sought and they were glad to have me as their support worker (British Association of Social Workers, 1986).

In other words, looking at the predicament of this group under discourse, experience during the placement showed that they also need support in the area of advocacy, inclusion, emotional support and integration. To address these needs in a holistic manner, I advocated for those who request for access to public services and aspire to acquire knowledge by attending training courses. I also supported them to be socially included and integrate well in the society by taking up English classes for those from non-English speaking country. They were also encouraged during the intervention to join different groups in the community to promote social inclusion and enhance integration.

3.1 The Case of An Asylum Seeker with a need for a driver's licence

A specific case of intervention and advocacy during the internship was the issue of an asylum seeker who needs to get driver's license having passed the theory test and was denied by the licensing authority. This service user thought he was denied because he was an asylum seekers therefore he felt bad and was emotionally depressed.

He came to the agency worried even though he is a man, it is the norms of the agency not to turn people down, the agency attend to people in as much the person needs help.

I took the matter up, make some calls to the authority on his behalf and was giving appointment to come over to the licensing office. I accompanied the service user to licensing office because he could not communicate very well in English language due to his background. My intervention gave him some form of confidence and hope. Afterwards, I referred him to another agency that deals with men to attend English classes for him to feel more comfortable.

3.2 Other Cases

My intervention continues in the agency as I worked with other women in similar situation, interestingly no two situations are ever the same. There are few of them who are willing to take up training courses to occupy their time instead of being stagnated as the asylum seeking system prevents them from taking up employment or participating in full time education. For example there was one of them who desire to attend Kerry Education Services for a course and she was not sure of her eligibility. I supported her by advocating for her to know her chances of enrolling for the course without paying fees. I also encouraged her to participate in voluntary work so as to enhance her chances of getting sponsored in future. Moreover, there was another service user who is very new in the community and she belongs to the minority group (refugee), lonely and has no friends and she was desperate about her situation. Likewise she needed to get crèche for her daughter. I assisted her in getting a place for her daughter in one of the crèche in town. I spoke to her about series of courses available in the agency even though she prefers to take up training course that will fetch her certificate. Attempts to get her into other training institutions in town proved abortive she was therefore encouraged to make a choice from the training options available in the agency.

This she did and made a choice. While training with the agency I continued to make efforts to get her into other institutions of learning. Fortunately, attending the agency courses reduced her complaint of idleness. Overall, I advocated for as many of the asylum seekers/immigrant coming to the agency for one help or the other. I worked with other service users in diverse ways by making them feel welcomed and contributing to their sense of belonging and integration. I established an English language class for those who could not communicate very well in English – this was schedule once a week throughout my placement in the agency.

4. MATCHING THEORY TO PRACTICE DURING THE INTERVENTION

My intervention with the asylum seekers/ immigrants began with adequate assessment using systematic practice to explore my intervention. Systematic Practice is a framework that focused three major question in an intervention which are; achievement after the intervention, how to go about the intervention and what proof to show the intervention actually worked (Thompson 2009). Intervention may not be effective if the needs of the service users are not identified, moreover it is the norms of the social care profession to identify clients need and ensure those needs are met (Share & Lalor 2009).

“Appropriate assessment lies at the heart of effective service delivery for a whole range of health and social care provision. Its purpose is to identify and evaluate individuals' presenting needs and how they constrain or support his/her capacity to live a full and independent life. Councils should ensure that individuals are active partners in the assessment of their needs. Appropriate service provision can then be planned both in the immediate and in the longer term to promote or preserve independence” (Marjorie 2010 p.28).

After completing the initial assessment with the service users, system theory was used to draw necessary plans. Coulshed and Orme (1998) opined that assessment is an integral skill required when using system practice in an intervention. In order to produce good outcomes for the service user, it is vital to work together and the service users must be involved in the process (Watson & West 2006). Going by (Dominelli 2002) change is easier when both professional and users decides to follow the same direction in making changes. Healy (2005) proofs that system theory point out the metamorphoses in using knowledge and skills

to work with service user which also underlines the purpose of working together. Their involvement in the plans was important so we could agree together that we are making the best decision based on opportunity cost and to help them fulfil their level of commitment. Our working together is also to prioritise the issue and needs of the service users (Healy 2005).

I was particular about empowering the immigrant because I know they have hidden potentials that giving the right opportunities will position them to benefit greatly from the society. I was able to assist them in identifying these potentials in the context of the situation they found themselves. This support will definitely assist them to reach their full potential (Dominelli 2002). I measured up to my key role as social care worker by working with the immigrant using systematic practice, going by the second question of systematic practice, I have done justice to it by carrying the service user's along my in plan (Thompson 2009).

5. REFLECTIONS ON CLIENTS

The first service user I worked with was an asylum seeker that was denied driver's license in the licensing authority having passed his theory test. Due to his status in the country and language barrier he misunderstood the reason why he was denied. I empathised with him understanding the stress involve in passing the theory test and being denied to hold the evidence. Understanding his predicament and working with him gives me the idea of his paramount needs. The situation made him vulnerable because his mind is not settled and he looked worried having attended the licensing office on several occasions without yielding positive result also he was frustrated based on the communication problem. I decided to intervene because he was worried and if he was left alone without attention the problem could lead to ill-health. Attending to his need made me fulfil my role according to O'Connor & Murphy (2006 p.25) says "social work seeks to promote social change, problem solving, in human relationship, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being". I encouraged him to go for the English class in other agency so as to build his self- esteem and for him to be independent to take future challenges. My intervention was also to help him to gain greater control over his lives and to help him to be resilient (Thompson 2003). Furthermore, I worked with three other women with similar needs but in different situation. Theory informs that human problem are different and their problem are unique to them which also requires different ways of solving them. Observing these three women I noticed that one of them is seriously looking forward to her future in Ireland and have a desire to contribute positively to the betterment of the society therefore she need support in the area of learning English so as to fulfil her dreams.

I decided to enrol her in my English class because communication is an important aspect of inclusion and integration in the society. It is also a means to empower and enable the service users to achieve set objectives of inclusion and integration. Achieving their aim will not only benefit them but will also aid social capital which will be a booster to financial security (Thompson 2005). Investing in clients is therefore referred to as increasing human capital which also a way to create economic wealth and human well- being (O'Connor & Murphy, 2006).

6. WORK EVALUATION

However, an intervention is perfect when the piece of work is evaluated. Evaluation is an integral aspect of social care work; it is a stage where all helping work is processed (Thompson, 2002c cited in Thompson 2003). It also involves recognising strengths and weaknesses of a specific intervention activity and the lessons that can be learned from them; moreover it is an opportunity for me to look closely into the work I did and be aware of myself and the impact of the work on the service users. Evaluation could take place at the end of the intervention or in between, much can be learnt in the process (Thompson 2003). In my own case, my intervention was evaluated in the process.

While supporting and working closely with the asylum seeker/refugee I was able to recognise a series of concerns that have impacted on them as well as their responses which was mainly through assessments. The assessment assisted me in identifying my own strength and inadequacies as well as that of the service users. Applying systematic practice actively permitted me to work on the strength which will be good to create positive change in their future in Ireland as an immigrant (Thompson 2009).

My target throughout the intervention was to help the asylum seekers function to their full potential and I worked with them to achieve the aim of the intervention which was consented to at the start. When I began my intervention with the lady who has been declared as refugee and was new to Tralee community, she expressed her desire to go for any training course available and her daughter to start crèche, at the same time express her state of loneliness as she is parenting alone which leave her in a sad mood. Having realised my role, I supported her in a way to overcome her loneliness by getting her into a course in the centre where she met with new people, she was able to make friends which is important to overcome loneliness and isolation. My interaction with her after the first class proved to me that she benefited from the class and it has helped her to deal with her idleness and loneliness. Systematic practice allowed me to comprehend and respond to her need in her situation.

Consequently, the English class I organised was part of my strength in the intervention because I started it with passion and the class create an avenue for me to exhibit my communication skills. Seden (1999) describe four important skills of communication as active listening, giving attention, summarising information and reflecting feelings and reviewing back to their clients. Most of the asylum seekers especially the ones in my English classes were open to discussing other difficulties they were going through in their privately life which I felt it was the outcome of my being open and honest with them. According to systems theory the primary motive of working within a social care setting is to enhance and strengthen the service user's capabilities to familiarise and resolve problem (Healy, 2005).

Long after she discussed with me she confirmed her ability to be resilient in the midst of her adversities. The methodology used is appropriate for future practise. The class atmosphere was conducive enough for learning especially when we have one to one class. Subsequently, I also realized aspects of administering intervention where I need to make improvements as I worked with

the asylum seekers/refugee. Empathy versus feelings became an issue for me, according to Thompson, 2009 empathy is to understand other people's perspective and putting oneself in their shoes in order to be well equipped in dealing with their situation.

However, my feelings over-ruled my empathy skills in the case of the service user that was denied driver's licence in the licensing authority. Thompson also said people's workers should be aware of their feelings before attending to service users because feelings can influence both the intervention and its outcomes (Thompson, 2009). My supervision session with my supervisor was used to discuss my feelings and action. She encouraged me to maintain professional relationship regardless of my feelings towards his predicaments. My supervision is an avenue to express my feeling and the session always provide me with containment (Frogett, 2006). In the overall my supervision session every week was used to account for my work in the agency.

Being assertive is another aspect of my intervention that needed to be improved. I observed during my intervention that there are times I found myself in the ocean of confusion. For example there is a particular client who came to the centre to use the agency's public phone, as part of the agency policy phone calls are strictly for passing important messages and lifesaving information. This particular client is a regular caller to the agency; in one of her visits she was making unrelated calls to friends. My role was eroded because I found it very difficult to exercise assertiveness skills, telling her the policy of the agency with regards to the use of telephone just for her not to feel bad. She realised my weakness in that area and she took advantage to continue using the phone contrary to the agency's policy. Following Thompson's knowledge of being assertive will be a good approach to such situation.

"Being assertive involves not being frightened of hurting someone's feelings if this is necessary for the greater good. This can be done tactfully, gently and constructively-it does not have to involve an aggressive response" (Thompson, 2009 p.40).

7. ICTS IN INTERVENTION WORK

The use of ICTs for intervention purposes will have to be reinforced as a means of reducing social exclusion and improving the general ability of asylum seekers to integrate. ICTs can be employed as a tool for economic benefits to drive skills improvement among the asylum seekers and enhance the potential for employment among asylum seekers who are even at the risk of exclusion.

There is "work at home opportunities on the internet. ICTs can be used to offer this opportunity to asylum seekers thereby giving them the opportunity to take advantage of the more inclusive labour market made available through the internet. To social workers, ICTs can assist in strategic planning and service targeting, thus providing a better understanding of the nature, incidence, and causes of social exclusion and facilitates improved planning to address it. Through collection and sharing of information, social workers can develop a much better understanding of the patterns of social exclusion and the needs of excluded people. This allows the development and monitoring of evidence based social exclusion strategies and neighbourhood renewal strategies which can much more effectively and efficiently target services where they are needed.

Social workers can use ICTs to introduce asylum seekers to new ways to access services and the way services are delivered. This include, finding information on employment, health, and social support. They can therefore participate in an interactive manner on e-government platforms, and applying for a benefit or service by telephone or online, or making a payment of a parking fine using a secure Internet link. ICTs can also assist asylum seekers to interact electronically with service providers through e-mails or mobile phones.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS.

I find it highly rewarding and enjoyable working at the Resource Centre and the result of my intervention is very fulfilling and rewarding even though I was faced with various challenges. My practice placement offered me the opportunity to have first-hand experiences with different categories of people who need intervention and other forms of supports to integrate properly into the society and to solve one problem or the other. It provided a platform to match theory with practice. In the cause of my experience in the agency, certain recommendations/ suggestions were provided that will be of help to me in future as a professional. Good communication skill is one of the important skills I would like to carry on to my future practice because I realised its importance in dealing with both service users and colleagues.

Reflecting on my practice and being aware of self especially in the area of my feelings will make the difference in my future practice having realised them during my intervention (Thompson 2009). In general my practice placement was therefore totally beneficial and will serve as a basis for professional practice as a social care worker. Moreover, the conclusion will not be perfect if I failed to make the following recommendation for the betterment of the agency and the country Ireland. For the agency, I gathered that they are working very hard as a team towards achieving common goals which is a strength they need to build upon in delivering their service.

However, the kind of relationship among the staff contradict confidentiality in social care setting, I would recommend they tighten up a bit in this regard. Likewise systems put in place within the office should be adhered to strictly by everybody in order to aid equality among staffs (Share & Lalor 2009). Observation informs me that some rules within the agency are not followed by some of the staff also the agency staffs need to work on their boundaries with service users. This implies that the agency's policy and procedure need to be revisited in this regard.

It will be of great advantage if the country can look into their asylum seeking system and make some amendments that will benefit both the country and the people coming to seek asylum. In my own view, my experience working with the asylum seekers prove that if things were different people will not be stuck into the asylum system bored and idled. I will recommend that the government provide new ladder of opportunity from the school to the work place. This new opportunity will allow many to put in their own effort to benefit from the opportunity which will reduce the margin between the minorities. I would also recommend that the government strive to upgrade human capital by promoting access to a range of skills instead of making the asylum seekers idle and not adding to the economy of the state (Coinsidine and Dukelow 2009). It is going to be heart-warming seeing all the recommendation working for me, the agency and the country Ireland in future.

Finally, ICTs will play a great role in social inclusion by creating online forums for interaction between asylum seekers. For social workers, ICTS play a major role for building client databases, developing PowerPoint to develop presentations for training purposes. Asylum seekers can be engaged by training them on how to opened up e-mail addresses, subscribe to social media and use platforms such as Skype to keep in touch with family and friends. They could also be taught on how to search the Internet for news about their Country, and to search for job opportunities without the need of work permit in Ireland.

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