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The concept of risk

Risk assessment and management is reinforced as a crucial issue in the current social care context with older people (see also Chapter 27). The skilful management of risk set in a context of working positively with the rights of an individual to continue to assert their own wishes, needs and aspirations is central to the skill and value of the social work role (Stevenson, 1989). This is inevitably complex work and is in danger of being routinised by procedural assessment practice. In this context, risk may be centralised in assessment in order to attempt to secure finite resources. The concept of risk is also in danger of being narrowly understood and defined and its central relationship to quality of life overlooked. How should social workers be enabled to work creatively in complex situations of risk and continue to develop practice skills appropriate to the needs and aspirations of older service users (Tanner, 1998b)? What are the relative risks to Marjorie in pursuing different options in her future care?

Ageist stereotypes

Routinised assessments may also serve to reinforce ageist stereotypes, which abound about older people and, perhaps in particular, older people who need to use social and health care services (see also Chapter 3). For example, a focus on individual dysfunction and problem states can reinforce notions about the inevitable dependency of older people. A failure to consider an older person in their biographical context can have the effect of separating older age from the rest of the life course and rendering the complexities and uniqueness of a person's life invisible. Finally, failing to consider strengths and abilities can imply that older people are helpless in the face of change. How can we avoid older people's biographies entering our field of vision only at the point that they become known to us in a social work or care management context?

Balancing carer and user needs

Over the past decade the central role of informal carers has been increasingly recognised (Twigg and Atkin, 1994). Social workers and care managers face the practice tensions of working with carers and older service users who may have very different views about their circumstances and aspirations for the future. For example, how should social workers manage the tension of a carer, such as Joan, telling them that their older relative should move into a care home, while the older person is indicating that their key aspiration is to remain at home? Carers roles are dynamic and diverse and there is a need for social work to develop practice insight into the ways in which the role may change, often dramatically, over a relatively short time period (Ray, 2000). There is a need to recognise and understand the ways in which carers and those people they care for bring meaning and understanding to their situations, informed by their existing relationship (Nolan et al., 1996; Parker, 1994). The strengths, skills and approaches that they use to manage their circumstances should also be a feature of assessment, intervention and care planning. The social work role should be

focused on unpicking the complexity of these contexts and providing interventions which enhance and support service users and carers rather than providing services which, at best, can only substitute existing help or, at worst, be experienced as unhelpful. In the above case study, should Joan be supported in caring for her mother or should services be directly provided to Marjorie? Once again, these dilemmas point to a need for the ongoing development of practice skills and values aimed at being able to work positively with complex practice situations, including situations of conflict and disagreement. In what ways should the social work practice agenda inform practitioners in their ability to fully embrace the complexities of such work?

Crisis, change and transition

Social workers and care managers are inevitably engaged with older people at times of crisis, change and transition. They are faced with the goal of working positively with older people who are experiencing complex and frightening situations. In this context, social workers' skills and values must incorporate the ability to work with positive assessment but must also have the skill to provide positive and skilful interventions. This is a difficult issue as community care teams are increasingly driven towards short-term assessment and purchasing provision and there is not always a place where the short-term worker can refer an older person for longer term work. This is not a call for a return to long-term, open-ended 'casework'. But, we do challenge the notion that every service user has needs, which will inevitably be short term. A person with dementia, for example, may need time for a social worker to build a relationship with her/him. Difficulties with memory and communication, together with an appropriate concern about a 'stranger' intruding on a private life, may make it impossible for a social worker to engage in a short-term 'assessment relationship'. Older people bereft of lifelong partners may need time and skilful help to cope with, and manage in the aftermath of, their bereavement. Older people, like anyone else through the life course, may experience difficulties with alcohol and drugs, have sexual difficulties, find it hard to talk with their partner, be in an abusive relationship or face terminal illness. These life challenges can be as disabling as chronic physical or mental illness and do not necessarily lend themselves to a procedural assessment followed by the provision of off-the-peg interventions. How should social workers and care managers appropriately respond when they are faced with service users with complex needs requiring intervention beyond the provision of care services? What theoretical and practice bases should inform the gerontological social work agenda?

All these critical debates and dilemmas currently influence the social work role with older people. Social work must live with these tensions. Dealing with such complexities is the 'bread and butter' of social work. They highlight three important questions:

- What should constitute an appropriate social work practice agenda with older people?