



Review of the Social Work Education Initiative

Findings and Directions Report

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1) Introduction

The Social Work Education Initiative was funded at the Scottish Institute of Human Relations by the Scottish Executive to explore the relevance and application of modern psychodynamic and systemic thinking to current practice.

The Changing Lives (Review of 21st Century Social Work) Report emphasised the importance of a number of factors for future resolution that coincide with SIHR priorities. These included therapeutic social work, professional leadership at all levels of organisations-leading to more creative and autonomous practice, and the necessity of consultants in social work, the need for using external and internal consultation to enhance objectivity and expertise in practice and decision making.

The SWEI has focussed on addressing the usefulness of theory in practice and evidencing the effectiveness of learning about the feeling elements in social work thinking and practice, how a social work value and knowledge base can be enhanced by attention to interpersonal skills within a post-modern agency culture.

In completing the 3 year project SIHR acknowledges the financial support provided, and plans to use learning networks established to widen of the knowledge available for the social work services workforce in Scotland.

The gap in learning provision identified and explored has gained resonance with many practitioners, managers and social work academics. Its development, based on these initial findings, should lead to an embedding of important capacity in the work of key individuals and systems, leading over time to an invaluable resource. Building on what has been achieved, and linking the elements of a coherent approach to reflective practice, SIHR is now seeking partnerships that will expand the availability of its professional expertise.

Some key questions from our survey of programme participants include:

- How to hold onto the therapeutic relationship that is at the centre of quality social work against the prevailing culture of computers and tick boxes?
- Empowering front-line workers in a context of reducing capacity / increasing workload?
- Have some social workers in the field ... forgotten that their role is to support and enable change rather than just assess risk?
- Re-introducing what social work needs to be about in relation to change and context. Moving away from task only into helping work with feelings.

2) Aims and assumptions

SWEI was planned as a 3 year project to enhance practitioners and managers understanding and skills in using psychodynamic and systemic knowledge. It set out to apply the current evidence from relationship based social work, and its implications for effective management, to current Scottish social work services practice.

The aims were to increase awareness of the potential for interpersonal effectiveness, the use of self, in working alliances with service users, but also between workers and managers.

The frameworks developed provide a language, and way of thinking about the feeling component of the work, that validates the experience of social work practitioners. It is based on a reflective practice that incorporates detailed assessment knowledge as well as an appreciation of the workings of complex dynamic interactions between individuals and systems, particularly valuable for understanding intervention.

Participants expectations and experience bore out these initial assumptions: 65% of recent survey participants expected, and confirmed, excellence in the product.

- Level of careful thoughtfulness provided by the facilitators during the course inspirational.
- Attended the attachment course and thought it was excellent. It promoted good practice and a reflexive way of working. Also the deep connection between the borderline personality and poor attachment.
- Appeared to offer a different view of the managers' tasks – concentrating on the dynamics and how they affect supervision & effective working.
- Reputation of SIHR, It would look at process issues, ran a supervision course aimed at experiences managers.
- Find psychodynamic approach meaningful and helpful. Now
 - explore supervision skills in more depth.
 - Re-energise my abilities in supervision.
 - Develop skills and confidence.
- Benefited from a more professional piece of training –stimulated and enabled to look at practice.
- SIHR has a positive reputation. Felt course would offer more in-depth training than is usually available with the opportunity to reflect on self in role.
- Increasingly drawn towards psychodynamic thinking and have always known that the understanding of human relationships is at the core of our work as social workers.
- Reputation as a provider of high standard courses in a psychodynamic approach.
- Looking for course related to support and supervision in a social work context that would also consider the feelings component part of the work as something to be actively worked with

3) Activity

A series of learning events has been delivered over the three years, several national programmes run for local authority and voluntary agency staff in the 4 Learning Network areas across working in a generic mix of settings. The focus is on using attachment, psychodynamic and systemic frameworks to understand practitioner and supervisor/consultant roles. Programmes have also been delivered within single agencies.

National conferences were also organised on Reflective and Therapeutic Practice in Social Work Services, and on Psychotherapy and Social Work-Inner and Outer Lives (with the British Psychoanalytic Society). A multidisciplinary conference on Working Below The Surface in Organisations (run by SIHR) was attended by large numbers of social work managers.

Alongside this work of SWEI SIHR has also delivered learning on assessing and working with emotional and sexual abuse in social work, and on observational skills for social workers, and direct work with children.

SIHR colleagues also annually deliver a range of multidisciplinary clinical and organisational programmes, designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of those working in the helping professions. (See Monitoring information-Annual Report Appendix A).

The practicality and impact of the programmes is evidenced by the recent survey 96% of respondents reporting subsequently using psychodynamic skills in enabling others:

- Through supervision but also in viewing staff to identify what are their issues and what belongs to the service users – notions of projection & transference.
- Used specifically with student Social worker in my role as Practice teacher in particular when discussing emotional needs of clients (older people) moving through the hospital discharge – care home process and not returning home.
- As a practice teacher working with students. Reflecting on dynamics within supervision, direct observation, discussing practice.
- Recently used materials on transference and counter-transference with a student social worker.
- SWEI course has unpacked on my supervisee's due to the fact we looked at a team's behaviour from a more psychodynamic perspective which enabled us to understand the more difficult behaviours being displayed by that team.

4) Inputs-programmes delivered

The model of reflective learning adopted in courses allows space for individual and group exploration of key concepts from current literature and research about the interactional elements of professional practice, in the light of 21st Century cultural and organisational expectations. The careful analysis of praxis, and the inter-subjective focus of much of the work, enables a return to first principles of empathy and its place in therapeutic social work. Participants have appreciated the opportunity to look at the potential for engaging service users in change work, across a range of contexts. Recognising that core skills in human relations still have significance for professionals working with complex problem solving has been refreshing and empowering for many participants in this continuous professional development.

Modelling attention to process and the conscious use of self in professional roles has led to significant change for a majority of respondents to our evaluations and longer term surveys.

One programme series (on consultation) involved post course meetings with individual participants and this has most clearly led to consolidated changes of practice and demonstrated the usability of concepts in action.

One account of the experience is as follows:

Social workers tend to lack a language or conceptual framework which values individual experience, particularly the subjective parts.

SWEI courses offered such a framework. It is encouraging to have ones own subjectivity treated as legitimate rather than as irrelevant or a liability. This is especially important in work which hopes to be personal, in work which is done best with genuine personal involvement, if not with love. Not all social work does require this, but a lot of social work hopes to tread the line between personal engagement and professional distance.

Social work aspired to being an agent of change and to some expertise in helping others come to terms with painful change and loss.

Social workers still need a language to describe it, a conceptual framework which allows them to acknowledge their own feelings first before presuming to make sense of other peoples.

The SWEI courses helped us to recognise attachments, their different forms and provenance and their influence on people's ability to adapt present difficulties. This is especially important where the dominant discourse discusses change only in the managerial terms of targets, numbers, measured outcomes and procedures, something of this seeps surreptitiously into client worker interactions and makes them overly instrumental.

This requires a more personal language which must encompass the irrational, the subjective and feelings which may seem at odds with public service, professionalism and indeed , being adult. The psychodynamic framework described on the SWEI courses helps workers do this, to have a language other than the instrumental, managerial or procedural and so to better discharge our public duty.

The current climate of quick fix makes the time required to think about the subject matter a little more challenging. The current trend in relation to solution focused and cbt type work makes it easier for employers to put workers on courses that require less time and thinking commitment. I think the challenge is in getting the balance right in terms of employers seeing the value in time spent reflecting / thinking about practice where there are complex emotions both for the workers and service users.

5) Design and Process

Learning opportunities and events were designed around material from key texts and their relevance for the current work of professional social work. The programmes have focussed on rethinking the role and performance of practitioners, including their supervising managers. Working with live case material consultants from SIHR have used their clinical and organisational expertise to enable and challenge participants to explore their practice with an eye to unhelpful repetitions as well as potential changes of interpretation and mode of operating.

This has involved expanding individuals' knowledge of psycho-social development, and building on their experience of personal and professional development towards reconsidered applications of theory in practice. Focussing on issues such as pattern recognition in communication, and the way individuals and systems can re-enact misunderstood conflicts or unresolved traumas, practitioners and supervisors report consolidated change in behaviour.

Specific components of the different programmes have involved:

- A model of critical thinking about social work practice and education.
- A method for integrating learning and experience with theoretical frameworks.
- Returning practitioners and managers to psychological and sociological explanations of behaviour as a base for understanding self and others, and for articulating Relationship-Based Social Work.
- Using integrated psychodynamic and systemic theory in analysing complex work.

- Making available sources of knowledge that explore recent findings on the effectiveness of psychotherapy and social work interventions.
- Engaging practitioners in fresh approaches to practice, narrative, attachment and attunement issues.
- Releasing worker creativity by raising their awareness of emotional intelligence.
- Building confidence in the professional use of self as a factor in achieving change.
- Working towards more autonomous assessment and intervention skills in situations of risk and vulnerability, based on informed frameworks for observation, and an appreciation of the literature on professional deskilling.
- Creating a greater shared sense of expertise for workers and managers in making space for reflective practice.
- Adding to practitioners and managers capacity for using theory in action.
- Evaluating educational and continuous professional developmental processes.
- Professional leadership, enabling optimal practice and learning cultures.
- Strategic leadership based on an understanding of organisational dynamics.

Survey respondents confirm evidence of their transferred learning:

- Course related to support and supervision in a social work context that would also consider the feelings component part of the work as something to be actively worked with.
- More conscious of my own input in supervision of staff and how enthusiasm can positively impact on others. More aware of what I need for myself in terms of supervision and support.
- Reflecting on the psychodynamic processes within teams and within the supervision relationship.
- I was in a bit of a rut vis a vis supervision – I've approached it differently since, with spin off in the process of using Family Therapy / systemic practice in learning and development.
- We often get preoccupied with the outcome or the tasks and lack attention to the process involving how we work along side service users and other professionals / staff members. A psychodynamic process should assist with a more rounded approach to practice and the part we play in it.

6) Output measures - evaluation

The high ratings achieved in the evaluation of programmes, and the confirmatory accounts of sustainable change in surveys of effectiveness confirm the value of the models used for learning, and the design and delivery by staff consultants. Teaching and learning have affected the thinking and practice of most participants, the findings in relation to those managing staff groups giving most clear evidence of the potential for continued work.

Key indications of programme effectiveness from evaluations are as follows:

Taking Care of Attachment in Social Work 3 day programmes 2005-6 (42 participants), 73% rated effectiveness of learning, with an overall satisfaction rate of 72%.

Therapeutic Skills Workshops for Social Work 2 day programmes 2006 (20 participants), 82% rated effectiveness of learning, with an overall satisfaction rate of 86%.

Professional Consultation and Supervision in Social Work Services 2 days plus consultation programmes 2006-7 (45 participants to date), 85% rated effectiveness of learning, with an overall satisfaction rate of 86% (see Annual Report to SE App.E).

Accounts of applying changes to work environments (96% of survey participants) include the following:

- Relationship between the supervisor and supervisee the primary focus of the work, that unless there is clarity about this no meaningful discussion can take place about the service user.
 - Opportunity to reflect on a particularly difficult staffing issue which aided me to look at ways to tackle this with this particular member of staff in a safe environment.
 - More aware of issues which can hinder effective communication. Given ideas for different problem solving techniques.
 - Used material in considering other options to support more thorough assessment.
- Lots of reflection on supervision process with staff. Undertook a team review (end of year review) and set new objectives with staff.
- More mentally aware and critical of self / practice.
 1. I think the course re-improved my belief or need to “work with” feelings of workers.
 2. Helped work out whose feelings these were.
 3. Working on containing feelings. Or locating feelings with the ‘owner’.

7) Outcomes – survey findings 2005 - 2007

The survey conducted in summer of 2007 on SWEI programme participants mirrors and develops the accounts received in the 2005 survey of social worker participants on multidisciplinary SIHR programmes. Not only are the knowledge inputs and model of learning highly praised but the modelling of reflective and focussed listening, based on psychodynamic and systemic frameworks of understanding practice, have received particular acknowledgement in evidence of change.

91% of survey respondents were very positive about their satisfaction with their experience as learners, and only one respondent was clearly mismatched for the expectations of the particular programme.

- Left me feeling motivated to supervise staff more constructively than today’s tight box expectation.
- Thought provoking, looked at managers problem areas, used research and articles well to widen subject.
- Very helpful in understanding in more depth, problems encountered in supervision.
- Matched my expectations - values the work and complexity of issues in H & S. Care Practice.
- Gained knowledge and understanding of “me” in my role and what I bring e.g. Transference and Projection. Excellent participation of group. Excellent facilitators.

In working with the boundary between conscious and unconscious material many participants came away with new understanding of other’s and their own blind spots, and reported achieving different outcomes on returning to work. This has included both the previous missing of key elements in the assessment of practice and in the understanding of ones own performance. (Some examples are included as Appendix B).

8) Positioning SIHR for Social Work effectiveness

SIHR has a wide range of expertise in working with individuals and systems for change, psychotherapeutically, professionally and organisationally. Participants on SWEI programmes during the past 2 years have confirmed the relevance of SIHR inputs and consultation for many areas of social work services. The themes are summarised in Appendix A following.

The overwhelming consensus is that SIHR should use its skills in consultation, usable across services, to continue working with key individuals and groups to develop their experience, knowledge and skills to improve outcomes for service users. Clearly much of the work of the Initiative points up the relevance of the models of mental health and personality development that underpin both psychotherapy and many social work service endeavours, including the supervision of staff.

A particular finding from the work for participants and SIHR consultants, is the practicality of taking psychodynamic and systemic thinking to the workforce, and applying models that effect change in the performance of key individuals. The evidence of the 3 years is that work with service users, with practitioners, and with managers can be enhanced in depth and containment through developing skills and understanding in the dynamics of relationships. The work has clear applications for service effectiveness, as well as in the leadership and management of organisational dynamics.

Appendices

A) Future work summary of Survey suggestions

Suggested topics for future work:

Managing staff groups. Dealing with challenging / angry families / service users.

Direct work with individuals and families. Team operations as groups and group dynamics within them. Supervision of staff and facilitation of reflective practice.

Considering effect of work on staff functioning, more aware of blocks, helps to motivate and get best out of staff.

Managing the impact of working with adult abuse on workers. Attachment and loss. Managing teams.

Working with clients on life history in terms of meaningful narrative.

Managing conflict in teams.

Holding or boundaries in the supervision process.

- Developing self awareness in the effective social work practitioner.
- Child Protection.
- Developing a parenting model that does not shame the parent.
- Working with borderline personality disorders service users.
- Understanding the service users without labeling.

Supporting service users to understand themselves.

Increased relevance in:

- Mentoring. Leadership Programme for senior managers. Coaching.
- Non-line management staff support arrangements may develop from the Changing Lives review. SIHR would be well placed to provide or facilitate.
- Stress the importance of 'process' not just task – centred. Also to encourage workers to 'allow' themselves to work with their feelings.
- Liaison with local authority training teams offering experience, training materials.
- groups to explore practice / management issues.
- To facilitate group sessions to explore supervision issues / processes – to continuing the learning from the course.

Systemically:

- Work with our Workforce Development to look at staff training needs/causes as a whole.
- Team 'Away' Days – facilitating the process.
- Working with senior managers to manage change inclusively / creatively.
- Follow up support in situ would be valuable particularly as a number of co-managers from my L.A. completed this course and reported benefits.
- Consultation or customised packages to be accessed for team development days.
- Working with managers – how to offer good quality support to workers, promote creative practice.

Appendices (continued)

B) Programme change theme examples

An assumption that has been borne out through our extended work with some managers is that patterns of communication and understanding observed within the supervision of direct work often mirrors the practice dilemmas. One example would be where supervision has become an uncritically repeated version of a parental model, inappropriately comfortable for the manager and disempowering for the supervisee. Several of our participants acknowledged the need to review the kind of dynamic they were part of in teams as well as one to one supervision. Discovering or having these patterns revealed during learning can be freeing as well as relevant to allowing more autonomous practice.

Many of those we worked with needed to explore the nature of their personal and professional authority and how they developed and sustained it appropriately. Issues of dependency and responsibility in role frequently became the focus of critical practice, with supervisory patterns used to unpick some of the practice styles and decisions related to positions taken or assessments implemented.

Some of the most effective learning was around the recognition of the value of key concepts, often known but unnamed, or misunderstood, because of the isolated thinking of either practitioner or manager.

The impact of the emotional work undertaken in many areas of social work and the need for support in dealing with its consequences, for all levels of response, is a theme that links the experience of most participants. In undertaking the consultancy phases of the work we have encountered many examples of managers being empowered to return and challenge difficult individual or team issues after using the learning opportunities to clarify their own contribution and sometimes investment in unresolved and difficult work relationships.

Related reading:

An Inspection into the Care and Protection of Children in Eileen Siar. Social Work Inspection Agency 2005.

A plan of Action 2005-2010. Scottish Social Services Council.

Borderline Welfare, Feelings and Fear of Feelings in Modern Welfare, Cooper, A and Lousada, J. Karnac, London, 2005.

Caleb Ness Inquiry-Edinburgh and the Lothians Child Protection Committee 2003.

Changing Lives-Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review. Scottish Executive 2006.

National Strategy for the Development of the Social Services Workforce in Scotland. On being met as a person: The dynamics of attachment in professional encounters Karnac,, McCluskey, U . London 2005.

Psychoanalytic Theory for Social Work, Thinking under Fire. Bower, M (Ed.) Routledge 2005.

Report of the Inspection of Scottish Borders Council Social Work Services for People Affected by Learning Disabilities, April 2004.

Scottish Social Services Council Review of Continuous Professional Development 2005.

The Report of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry by Lord Laming 2003.

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The Scottish Institute of Human Relations

172 Leith Walk Edinburgh EH6 5EA Tel: 0131 454 3240 Fax 0131 454 3241 edinburgh@sihr.org.uk	5 La Belle Place Glasgow G3 7LH 0141 332 0011 0141 332 3999 glasgow@sihr.org.uk
www. sihr.org.uk	

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Edinburgh Office: 172 Leith Walk, Edinburgh EH6 5EA
t: 0131 454 3240, f: 0131 454 3241, e: edinburgh@sihr.org.uk or info@sihr.org.uk, w: www.sihr.org.uk
 Glasgow Office: 5 La Belle Place, Glasgow G3 7LH, t: 0141 332 0011, f: 0141 332 3999, e: glasgow@sihr.org.uk or info@sihr.org.uk

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