Revisiting Lancaster : more things that every social work student should know

Myers, JS

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615470701709709

Title	Revisiting Lancaster : more things that every social work student should know
Authors	Myers, JS
Publication title	Social Work Education
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Type	Article
USIR URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/14953/
Published Date	2007

Revisiting Lancaster: More Things that Every Social Work Student Should Know
Steve Myers

First published on: 20 November 2007

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Revisiting Lancaster: More Things that Every Social Work Student Should Know

Steve Myers

It has been argued previously that social work students need to understand what is known about those people who sexually offend and abuse in order to provide adequate services to both victims/survivors and offenders/abusers. This article explores how engaging with a highly emotional topic can be undertaken in ways that make links with other forms of knowledge within social work education programmes. It also presents techniques based on the experience of teaching and learning about sexual offending that have been useful, allowing students to think and talk about issues that are often obscured by emotion, rhetoric and claims for truth.

Keywords: Social Work Education; Sexual Offending; Sexual Abuse

Sexually harmful behaviour has gained increasing attention during the previous two decades within human services, with criminal justice and welfare services focusing on the needs not only of victims of sexual violence, but in working with those who commit the behaviour. Just over a decade ago in this journal, Lancaster (1997) outlined some of the ways in which theory, research and practice in this field were relevant to social work students, not just in working with what she termed perpetrators, but in allowing reflection on how this knowledge can be transferred into broader social work teaching. She made recommendations for teaching and learning on social work programmes, including the integration of knowledge of sexual offenders that could be helpful in identifying and responding to sexually harmful behaviour.

This article re-considers what would be useful for social work students to know about this subject, accepting that there has been an increasing body of knowledge on the causality, frequency, understanding, management and treatment of those who commit sexual offences. It argues that rather than simply providing students with this

Correspondence to: Steve Myers, School of CHSSC, University of Salford, Allerton Building, Frederick Road, Salford M6 6PU, UK. Email: j.s.myers@salford.ac.uk

knowledge, this subject offers opportunities to develop critical and reflexive skills in engaging with highly emotive issues. It considers ways in which the processes of education can assist in this development, with a particular focus on the role of emotion within reflexivity.

This article is informed by my practice as a worker with children and young people with sexually harmful behaviours, as a trainer of social care workers and in integrating this into a Level 2 Youth Justice module on a social work undergraduate programme. The nexus of children, young people, crime and sexual misbehaviour has allowed space to consider not just what social work students should know, but how teaching in such a problematic area can be undertaken in a reflexive way to enable students to engage with enormously emotive matters that can challenge their own sexualities, question their belief systems, stir unwelcome desires and sometimes can even be hard to imagine. The process of enabling students to consider theory, research, policy and practice whilst acknowledging the anxiety that this generates is illustrated through exercises. Asking students to think about how they can retain respect for clients when these same clients are regarded by society (and probably ourselves) as moral pariahs, adds value to discussions about the nature of anti-oppressive and ethical practice.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity has become a central concept in social work education as an approach that is desirable and productive. D'Cruz *et al.* (2007) argued that the term is complex and has different meanings/emphases dependent on the context of its use. They identify three main uses: first, the *reflexive modernity* influenced by Giddens (1990) that focuses on the ways in which individuals construct their position in the world and make choices; second, the reflexive approach to how knowledge is created within professional practices and how power operates within the construction of knowledge (Taylor & White, 2000); and third, how the second approach can recognise and engage with the significance of emotions within the construction and operation of knowledge (Mills & Kleinman, 1988). This latter meaning is the one which will be used to consider how social work students may be invited to engage with the topic of sexual offending.

The notion of *epistemic reflexivity* (White, 1997), that is critically analysing our claims to knowledge and becoming aware of the dominant professional constructions influencing social work practice, is helpful to make sense of this subject in which knowledge is often hidden, obscured or claimed by emotion, theory and professional power. Mills & Kleinman (1988) discussed the importance of emotions on the ability to be reflexive, and D'Cruz *et al.* (2007, p. 81) argued that '… practitioners need to develop an awareness of how their emotional reactions to certain situations might undermine their reflexive abilities'. Sexual offenders and offending are some of the most highly charged issues in our society and recognising emotions when teaching is clearly important.

The role of emotions in social work has been recognised since the beginning of the profession, with a wariness of how feelings can affect judgement and exhortations to be on guard against the intrusion of the emotional into the rational decision-making process (Biestek, 1961; Woods & Hollis, 1990). This understanding of emotions considered them to be a problem to be managed, and with the development of more rational-technocratic approaches the pursuit of 'objectivity' became even more privileged (Kondrat, 1999), boosted by the claims of the evidence-based practice movement (Sheldon, 2001). Emotions clouded the 'pure' rationality of knowledge, and feelings got in the way of applying the logical process to problems. It was important to know your self (values/feelings/emotional responses) in order to tame their influence on the rational. This rational approach will be familiar within social work education when students make claims to wish to be 'non-judgemental' in their practice, a paradox when the social work business is about making judgements and the term illustrates the powerful image of an objective professional role. The non-judgemental stance appears based on the anxiety that their life experiences, values and emotions may adversely affect the 'true' understanding of the service user, as if this was achievable, desirable and real, rather than provisional and co-constructed (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000).

Miehls & Moffatt (2000) discuss the ways in which such management of emotions is premised on the assumptions of ego psychology, where learning is viewed as 'focused on the internal workings of the student's intrapsychic world' (p. 341). This locates the student as responding to the threat of the unsettling other, and reflection is a process of dealing with the strength of feeling generated within the self, rather than exploring the intersubjectivity between the student and the other. This creates tensions in practice (or practise) as it does little to reach out to the person and seek to understand their situation, needs, views and local solutions to their behaviour. The mandate of empathy, non-judgementalism and neutrality is easily withdrawn from people who are so threatening due to social approbation of the behaviour, but also due to the fear, disgust, anger and anxiety generated for the student. For example, I have also encountered colleagues who are clear about their commitment to anti-oppressive practice, yet recoil visibly at the very idea of applying this theoretical perspective to those who sexually offend.

Making Knowledge

When engaging any difficult situation, social workers need to be able to understand, or at least be aware of, what influences their sense-making and be conscious of the complexities and competing knowledge that is being brought to bear. How we make sense of sexual offending will be apparent in our interactions, our questions and our interpretations with those who commit it; the process will illuminate our assumptions and meanings. The desire to diagnose, categorise and treat is strong in social work, whether based on the attachment theory of Bowlby (1951) where we look for emotional deficits that can be (possibly) rectified, or in cognitive-behavioural approaches that look for wrong-thinking to put right. It is likely that

given the emotional context and harmful consequences of sexual offending there will be a desire for certainty and absolute answers, particularly about danger. Inviting students and social workers to recognise that this is unlikely to happen can be unsettling for them and the *process* of teaching and learning will have to take this into account. Uncertainty may be viewed as failure to have performed the required task (I have not found out the truth), whereas it can be re-visioned as a rational response to complexity and the provisional nature of decisions (I can say this about this person at this time).

I have often seen the quest for certainty in training programmes, where some participants state that they want to know the 'factors that are dangerous'. Factor-based approaches lend an air of certainty and are common in many assessments of risk. However, they have major difficulties, one of which is that many of the factors (which are usually distilled from selected groups) are open to interpretation and another is that they are based on theoretical assumptions that are not always transparent (Douglas, 1992). The process of making a factor (knowledge) is often overlooked, and the example of Conduct Disorder is one which is helpful to consider. This diagnosis appears in the AIM Initial Assessment protocol, a common tool in the assessment of sexually offending boys (Print *et al.*, 2001), as an absolute indicator of dangerousness. It can be useful to introduce students to the symptoms of this diagnosis in the ICD-10 (WHO, 1992, p. 267):

> Examples of the behaviours on which the diagnosis is based include the following:
>
> - excessive levels of fighting or bullying
> - cruelty to animals or other people
> - severe destructiveness to property
> - fire-setting
> - stealing
> - repeated lying
> - truancy from school and running away from home
> - unusually frequent and severe temper tantrums
> - defiant provocative behaviour and
> - persistent severe disobedience
>
> Any one of these categories, *if marked*, is sufficient for the diagnosis, but isolated dissocial acts are not.

When invited to reflect on the way in which the diagnosis can be constructed, students have the opportunity to understand the interpretative, contingent and complex processes at work in what initially appears to be a definitive medical diagnosis. The certainty of the factor becomes destabilised as its socially constructed nature becomes apparent.

Since Lancaster's article in 1997 there has been a large body of literature on the subject of sexual offending and abuse, focusing on who these people are and how to assess and manage them (Calder *et al.*, 1999; Hackett, 2004; Brown, 2005; Kemshall & McIvor, 2004) as well as helpful overviews of policy development (Thomas, 2005). Students can access such material and apply the approach of their choice, but

reflexivity requires a further understanding of the ways in which the knowledge contained in these publications is constructed.

Any scanning of the literature on sexual offending demonstrates that psychological discourses permeate the field, with research primarily focused on truth-seeking and categorisation (Quinsey *et al.*, 1995; Hanson & Thornton, 2000; Calder *et al.*, 1999). Cognitive behavioural approaches dominate practice guidance, making assumptions about the nature of people and problem-behaviour (Marshall & Eccles, 1996; McGuire, 2000). Understanding this body of knowledge about sexual offending and offenders requires skills in recognising the epistemological basis from which it has developed in order to be clearer about the boundaries, limitations and opportunities for effective practice. Truth-claims about the perceived nature of sexual offending need to be subjected to scrutiny if we are to develop practices that recognise complexities and are effective in reducing problematic behaviour. Students require input about the increasing recognition that cognitive-behavioural approaches do not have the evidence to support their claims to being effective in this area (Rice & Harris, 2003), which allows for discussion about how research evidence is constructed.

As this is a morally charged issue, the experience of victims requires explicit acknowledgement when discussing sexual offending. The hurt and harm caused by sexual misbehaviour is at the core of the need to respond to offenders, and students may need the opportunity to express their anger at such actions. The moral imperative to work with victims is fairly clear-cut and sits comfortably with most social work students and their commitment to 'helping people'. However, there are difficulties with this rather binary view of the social work world, as many people do not inhabit such safe and deserving categories and practice can be messy. Offenders can be both undeserving (they have harmed someone) and deserving (they are victims themselves), or powerful (they have abused their power) and powerless (they are children themselves). Victims and survivors can be reduced to passive actors with needs that can only be met with particular interventions by theory-wielding experts (Warner, 2001), and *all* offenders can be demonised as deviant, different and dangerous with the mandate of anti-oppressive practice removed from them (Hackett, 2000). Both victims and offenders can become the 'other'; constructed in ways that are fixed. This denies the differences within the constructed categories, and overlooks the local and individual opportunities for change particularly with offenders, where their personal circumstances are subsumed into an identity of dangerousness, hopelessness and deviance.

Given the prevalence of sexual abuse in society it is likely that many of the students will have been victims of some form of sexual abuse or unwanted sexual behaviour during their lives and it is important to recognise the direct emotional impact of the discussions around such behaviour. For example, uncritical replication of claims about those who are the victims of sexual abuse being more likely to become sexually abusive has the potential to be hurtful to those who have experienced abuse and need to be treated with caution. As the world is a complicated place, there may be value in acknowledging that some people may have been involved in sexual behaviour that is illegal (any student who engaged in sexual activity under the age of 16, or possibly 18

or 21 in the historical case of some men involved in same-sex relations), manipulative or even aggressive. Early sexual activity is fraught with complications and is not always clear-cut. Students will know from their own experiences that there will have been times when they may have been closer to being a sexual offender than is comfortable. This allows for a narrowing of the gaps between what is perceived as 'normal' and that of the 'abnormal', what is 'acceptable' and 'non-acceptable' and between 'them' and 'us'.

Definitions

The introduction to this article used a variety of terms to describe the behaviours that are problematic and those who commit them. Use of language is important in allowing students to understand that the terminology they (or others) use is not simply a neutral statement of the situation, but reflects particular ideological and knowledge claims about the nature of the problem, its causes and the consequent practices to deal with it (Wittgenstein, 1963). Introducing students to the significance of language-use can link in with other teaching about discourses and how they limit and boundary what is allowed to be known about a subject. There have been debates about the most useful terminology to apply with those who commit sexual misbehaviours, and inviting students to define what may be sexually harmful is a helpful starting point.

This is a rich field for social work students who need to be able to recognise and respond to the ways in which how we use language can (subtly or otherwise) influence how we think of people. Kelly (1996) identified concerns about the use of the term 'paedophile', and rather than heeding these warnings it appears that this word has entered lay as well as professional discourse in an all-pervasive way. Kelly was concerned at the pathologising effect of using this term to construct someone who was different from others, thus reducing a set of social, political and cultural concerns about power and gender to an aberrant and abnormal personality-type. 'Paedophile' is a particularly pernicious word in social work, which cannot fail to be used in a derogatory way to reduce someone to their abusive actions, thus locating the problem-behaviour in deviance and psychopathology.

This language also feeds into images of 'stranger-danger', where the paedophile is someone who is an outsider often with visible characteristics of dress, behaviour and personality traits. When asked to visually represent a paedophile, students quickly construct an older man, in a raincoat, with a bag of sweets, living alone with a repertoire of tricks to entice children with, despite the fact that up to 90% of sexual offenders are known to their victims. Intellectually we may dismiss the stereotype, however, this demonic image is viscerally held and the ease with which people can share this is quite illuminating. The collective story of the paedophile requires acknowledging, as this is not far removed from the ways in which some professional language and understandings construct the sexual offender as someone different from an assumed norm.

Identifying and defining sexual offenders are complex issues, and defining sexual misbehaviour is no more straightforward. We can call something rape when it is a sexual assault supported by violence or the threat of violence, although this becomes more complicated when the Sexual Offences Act 2003 defines this as being the act of penile penetration of the vagina or anus, something which many students are unaware of. As usual, people can identify and agree on extremes, but there are gradations of sexual misconduct that create confusion, uncertainty and disagreement. Asking students to explore scenarios in small groups can be helpful in allowing for thoughtful consideration of some of this key issue. The scenarios can include extreme examples, but also complications for example by age (can a six-year-old commit a sexual offence?), gender (is a 16-year-old girl who has a sexual relationship with a 15-year-old boy a sexual offender?), ability (is a man with learning disabilities responsible for his actions when he may not be aware of the moral and legal boundaries?), class (do we expect under-age sexual activity to be more predominant in certain areas?) and ethnicity (is the marriage of girls under the UK age of consent a crime?).

Students can be invited to think about their teaching on human development by reflecting on the expected sexual behaviours of children and young people at various ages. Providing a chart with age ranges and asking students to list what they think are the associated expected sexual behaviours provides a method of enabling discussion of what these may be, where their beliefs have originated and what implications there are for their practice (Myers & Milner, 2007, p. 10). It may be of additional benefit to extend this and include expectations of different genders and sexualities. Exercises such as these allow for discussion of the moral positions of students and how these may influence practice. Strongly held views are brought to light and can be interrogated, not to mould them into some truth, but to consider where they may have come from, what they are based on and how they are deployed to understand sexual behaviour. What is known about sexual behaviour in children and young people is limited, although there is some research evidence that can assist in broadly defining what is expected, usual, concerning, worrying or downright harmful. Hackett (2004) provides a review of research that can inform where these boundaries may be drawn.

Externalising for Education

Returning to the significance of emotion as a complicating factor in reflexivity, a helpful process in allowing people to think about sexual offending has been one based on *externalising*, a concept developed within Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) to provide the space to interrogate problematic feelings and identities. People hold strong views about sex offending that they may feel unable to discuss as they can be contrary to perceptions of the need to take a liberal stance on issues within assumed social work values. Repulsion, disgust and anger are feelings that will affect their ability to work in this area, feelings that are (probably) unhelpful for offenders but also for their own emotional well-being. Giving students permission to identify what images there are in society of those who commit sexual offences, including the use of colloquial language, frees them from ownership of these feelings through

claims that this is what others know. Reference can be made to the media or to the views of family and friends, rather than asking them what *they* think. Inviting students to name these images and collating them visually allows for a vast range of terminologies, abusive words, identities, explanations and responses to the behaviour to emerge, images that they will hold themselves but are unlikely to wish to admit.

This distancing allows for consideration of the implications of these images for social work practice. The list can be puzzled over and the various discourses identified, thus creating the space for reflexive engagement with these powerful statements. The reality of some of the images can be questioned, and also the ways in which they create a specific identity of otherness, allowing students to question the solidity of these images. Being critical of extreme statements that construct difference can open up the possibility of reclaiming sexual offenders as within the spectrum of humanity, therefore possible to engage with. This exercise can be developed further through inviting students to consider what else sex offenders are, which provides the opportunity to explore similarities in a reasonably comfortable way (father, brother, mother, sister and so on). The listing of similarities has the potential to be extensive and open up the possibility that students and social workers have skills that are transferable in engaging with this behaviour.

Conclusion

Underpinning what social work students should know about sexual offending is a commitment to enabling them to become reflexive practitioners who can understand the ways in which we construct people through and by language, as well as how knowledge is provisional and privileged through claims to truth. There are many 'facts' to be learned about sexual offending and offenders—students can find these in any of the texts available. However, we need to consider how they engage productively with a topic that generates strong emotional response, allowing them to consider their practice in this context. Engaging with some of these issues in smaller seminar or tutorial groups, adopting experiential and critically reflective approaches, may be essential for personal learning. Taking a positive strengths-based approach may also be helpful in practice learning, focusing on the transferability of skills that they will already have, and that are effective with non- (as far as they know) sexual offenders.

Acknowledgements

References

Biestek, P. (1961) *The Casework Relationship*, Allen and Unwin, London.
London, J. (1951) *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, World Health Organisation, Geneva.

Brown, S. (2005) *Treating Sex Offenders: An Introduction to Sex Offender Treatment Programmes*, Willan Publishing, Cullompton.

Calder, M. C., Hampson, A. & Skinner, J. (1999) *Assessing Risk in Adult Males who Sexually Abuse Children: A Practitioner's Guide*, Russell House Publishing, Lyme Regis.

D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P. & Melendez, S. (2007) 'Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: a critical review of the literature', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 37, pp. 73–90.

Douglas, M. (1992) *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London.

Giddens, A. (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press/Blackwell, Oxford.

Hackett, S. (2000) 'Sexual abuse, diversity and the challenge of anti-oppressive practice', *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 4–20.

Hackett, S. (2004) *What Works for Children and Young People with Sexually Harmful Behaviours?*, Barnardo's, Barkingside.

Hanson, R. K. & Thornton, D. (2000) 'Improving risk assessments for sex offenders: a comparison of three actuarial scales', *Law and Human Behavior*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 119–136.

Kelly, L. (1996) 'Weasel words: paedophiles and the cycle of abuse', *Trouble and Strife*, vol. 33, pp. 44–49.

Kemshall, H. & McIvor, G. (eds) (2004) *Managing Sex Offender Risk*, Jessica Kingsley, London.

Kondrat, M. E. (1999) 'Who is the ''self'' in self-aware: professional self-awareness from a critical theory perspective', *Social Service Review*, December 1999.

Lancaster, E. (1997) 'Perpetrators of sexual crime: what every social work student should know', *Social Work Education*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 91–110.

Marshall, W. L. & Eccles, A. (1996) 'Cognitive-behavioral treatment of sex offenders', in *Sourcebook of Psychological Treatment Manuals for Adult Disorders*, eds V. B. Van Hesselt & M. Hersen, B. T. Batsford, London.

McGuire, J. (2000) *An Introduction to Theory and Research: Cognitive-Behavioural Approaches*, HM Inspectorate of Probation Report, HMSO, London.

Miehls, D. & Moffatt, K. (2000) 'Constructing social work identity based on the reflexive self', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 30, pp. 339–348.

Mills, T. & Kleinman, S. (1988) 'Emotions, reflexivity and action: an interactionist analysis', *Social Forces*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 339–348.

Myers, S. & Milner, J. (2007) *Sexual Issues in Social Work*, BASW/Policy Press, Bristol.

Parton, N. & O'Byrne, P. (2000) *Constructive Social Work; Towards a New Practice*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Print, B., Morrison, T. & Henniker, J. (2001) 'An inter-agency assessment framework for young people who sexually abuse: principles, processes and practicalities', in *Juveniles and Children who Sexually Abuse: Frameworks for Assessment*, ed. M. Calder. 2nd edn, Russell House Publishing, Lyme Regis.

Quinsey, V. L., Rice, M. E. & Harris, G. T. (1995) 'Actuarial prediction of sexual recidivism', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 85–105.

Rice, M. E. & Harris, G. T. (2003) 'The size and sign of treatment effects in sex offender therapy', *Sexually Coercive Behaviour: Understanding and Management*, vol. 989, July, pp. 428–440.

Sheldon, B. (2001) 'The validity of evidence-based practice in social work: a reply to Stephen Webb', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 801–810.

Taylor, C. & White, S. (2000) *Practising Reflexivity in Health and Social Care*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Thomas, T. (2005) *Sex Crime: Sex Offending and Society*, 2nd edn, Willan Publishing, Cullompton.

Warner, S. (2001) 'Disrupting identity through visible therapy: a feminist post-structuralist approach to working with women who have experienced child sexual abuse', *Feminist Review*, no. 68, pp. 115–139.

White, M. & Epston, D. (1990) *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, Norton, New York.

White, S. (1997) 'Beyond retroduction? Hermeneutics, reflexivity and social work practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 27, no. 6, pp. 739–753.

WHO (1992) *The International Classification of Disorders—10*, World Health Organisation, Geneva.

Wittgenstein, L. (1963) *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Woods, M. & Hollis, F. (1990) *Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy*, McGraw-Hill, New York.