A model for the new frontier of social work: Using respect, empathy, curiosity and time

Vaughan Milner

Vaughan Milner is Director of Family and Community Services for Presbyterian Support Otago. He has been involved in social work for 30 years in both government and NGO sectors in New Zealand. He has a particular interest in sustainable change through social action, and the inter-dependence which supports and encourages change.

Abstract

This article is the first of two that explores the increasing opportunities for micro, meso and macro interventions arising out of work associated with food banks. A practice model for delivery of social services via the foodbank is developed around the notion of social action. Interventions are paced to reflect the lived experience of clients and others who are involved. Emphasis is placed on the quality of relationships and the dimensions of respect, empathy, curiosity and time. These issues are explored in the context of Presbyterian Support Otago’s activity across three programmes covering work with individuals, at a community and interagency level, and as part of a national advocacy project.

Introduction

Much is made in social work training and in the literature of the potential for social workers to turn private troubles to public issues and to pursue social justice (Ife, 1997; Payne, 1997; Rees, 1991). Organisational practice imperatives of addressing increased demand for service, limiting duration of contact and providing specialisation during intervention have taken precedence over the simple notion of engaging with the client in a truly meaningful way. Consequently, the current practice environment is less likely to provide for the extraordinary diversity that exists in the way people respond to life’s challenges. Pacing service delivery to reflect where people are at is also more difficult in such a routinised, pressurised work situation.

Social work associated with food banks provides fresh opportunities for interventions based on relationships aimed at sustainable change at micro, meso and macro levels.

Staff in the Community Welfare Team at Presbyterian Support Otago have found the key elements of such work are driven by dimensions of respect, empathy, curiosity and time. Relationships built around these dimensions enable a client-driven change process that reflects the client’s reality, while enabling capacity development at individual, organisational, community and systems levels. The use of critical reflective practice and integrating a variety of theoretical perspectives with evolving practice informs the model’s development. This model has been shaped through consideration of critical theory and structural analysis, and provides a new frontier for old fashioned social work. It also allows for the people we see at the agency to muddle along at their own pace and to anchor change solidly around their own stories as they unfold.

In this article the socio-political context leading to the emergence of extensive food bank usage in New Zealand is examined. This analysis is followed by a description of the approach developed by Presbyterian Support Otago for the work based round the food bank and
associated client issues. The influence of the environment in terms of initiating overt social action is explained. The focus on dimensions of respect, empathy, curiosity and time and the idea of muddling along at the client’s pace are discussed and presented as a model for practice.

Setting the scene

During 1991 the former National Government cut benefit payment rates, established market rentals for state house tenants and introduced a range of user charges for previously free services. At the same time the effects of the State Sector Act (1988) and Public Finance Act (1989) dramatically influenced the way health, education and social services were funded and delivered. The combined effect of these changes in terms of economic and social policy was to reduce beneficiaries’ income by about $20 per week (equivalent to about $74 today when adjusted for inflation) and increase costs for essential items like housing and primary health care. Concomitantly, access to a range of services was reduced through targeting, gate keeping and rationing. Many health, welfare and educational services that had a preventive or early intervention focus retrenched or restructured. Consequently services in general became less accessible and responsive and more reactive in their service provision (Brown, 2000; Waldegrave, Stephens and King 2003).

During these years of rapid social and economic reform the configuration of families changed, along with the erosion of traditional community infrastructures. This in turn had significant impacts on the way people functioned as part of society as a whole. Ten years later the cumulative effects of these dramatic political interventions are apparent in extensive use of food banks, along with extended waiting lists for free or cheaper counseling, and other social services like mentoring and practical in-home help. Each week horror stories appear in the media of clients refused treatment or given short shrift by health, welfare or education agencies (Larson, 2003; Coddington, 2002). Interestingly, in Dunedin the state funded and run organisations, with the exception of CYFS child protection services, report less pressure than services provided by the non-government sector. In addition, the NGO services generally report trends towards working with client issues of greater complexity and higher levels of intensity (Dunedin Strengthening Families Management Committee, 2003). These same services rely on government funding and are increasingly driven by contractual requirements that include meeting volume targets and a range of specific service criteria. Within this context the duration of client contact is often limited, while budgetary constraints demand immediacy and quick results in everything including client change and response to intervention. The combined effects are a gap ridden, overstretched social service infrastructure within a community that is itself somewhat disconnected in terms of maintaining meaningful personal and neighborhood relationships compared with the village of the past (Pipher, 1996).

The organisational challenge.

With this societal backdrop the 1990s saw the emergence of a formal food bank at Presbyterian Support Otago for the first time in its 90 years of operation. Historically the organisation had provided occasional food assistance. In 1987, for example, there were fewer than 50 people provided with food as part of the broader social support activity of the Cameron Centre. In 1993 there were 2910 and by the year 2000 this had risen to 4534 food parcels at an average value of $25 per parcel.

Initially the food bank operated on the basis of giving a parcel to whoever asked for one, using donated goods. Staff attended to such requests as part of their other duties. By 1997 donated goods were being supplemented by purchase orders for a local supermarket and there was a half time social worker and receptionist dedicated to the food bank. Clients were expected to provide basic information as to identity, address and general circumstances, and some participated in a 10 to 15 minute interview. By the end of 1999 the staff were run off their feet with the
volume of clients. The social worker located in the food bank raised concerns about client needs not met and the broader public issues that drove people to seek help from the service. It was no coincidence that at about the same time Presbyterian Support Otago was challenged by Charles Waldegrave at its Annual General Meeting to develop a greater focus on social justice (Presbyterian Support Otago, 1999).

P for poverty and P for plan

The high volume of client need along with debate about issues of social justice led to two critical assumptions that Presbyterian Support Otago acted upon. The first was that the increasing demand for emergency food relief reflected spreading poverty, and was driven by societal pressures, social policy and economic decisions at governmental level. These decisions impacted particularly on women with children, and young socially isolated men. In addition, poor mental health and hardship due to living off a subsistence level of income were evident across these two specific client groups.

The second assumption was that more food wasn’t the answer, but that more time and effort might be. Time to listen, time to understand the issues and time to take action.

A plan was developed that was based on concepts of social action. Staff thinking about how they could provide more time to clients informed this plan. The welfare programme was reorganised and better resourced. The social work hours were increased, a specialist advocate was employed half time and the reception function changed to provide a mix of interviewing / assessment as well as meeting the reception needs. The social action was to focus activity on working towards sustainable change through reducing debt, increasing income and assisting clients to regain control of their circumstances. At this point the emphasis was on dealing with practical, mainly material issues while holding income support services accountable. The aim was to ensure clients accessed all they were entitled to and that their individual circumstances were taken into consideration. An interview process was established at the food bank that covered a broader range of questions, and gave the client and staff member more time to talk and explore potential courses of action.

Joining up nationally – the macro intervention

Soon after this approach was initiated the New Zealand Christian Council of Social Services developed its Poverty Indicator Project (PIP). This was a national project aimed at routinely gathering structured information about poverty as experienced by food bank users. The aim of this data gathering was to regularly publish the material as a means of keeping the issues in front of the government and the public. It was also intended this quantitative information would encourage participating food banks to be more advocacy focused (Barnes and Westbrook, 2002).

Presbyterian Support Otago was one of seven food banks that opted into the PIP project as it became known. This initiative, linked with the previous changes within the food bank process of service delivery, led to a pronounced trend towards advocacy work. This gave an increasing emphasis on finding ways to improve the system’s responsiveness to clients.

The data gathered for PIP began to highlight real anomalies in access to benefit entitlement, including inconsistent and highly restrictive decision making by Work and Income (WINZ) case managers for people in similar circumstances. Most importantly the data revealed the inadequate level of income provided by the base benefit and low wages. As the New Zealand Christian Council of Social Services promoted such issues nationally (NZCCSS PIP, 2002), the Presbyterian Support Otago staff began to further develop their own practice responses, with a strengthening conviction that more could be done for people. As a result, local action research on income adequacy began in Dunedin using client stories as another way to link casework with a social justice response. (Presbyterian Support Otago, 2002).
We were told..

As soon as someone comes up that’s got a bit of authority behind them they sit back and listen. Its like when my advocate dealt with WINZ for us. When we went in by ourselves we were getting nowhere. As soon as the advocate got on the phone it was different. They can do it; they just don’t want to do it for us (Tere).

I’ve bills for the doctors, telephone, rent, power. Ok well I need my power. I don’t need the phone. The doctor can wait and I’ll have to ignore the landlord for a while and then you know ... I call it juggling. Then I’ve got six people ringing me up in the next couple of weeks saying ‘well how come you’ve only given us half of this and you’ve only given us a wee bit of that?’ Then it ends up being real full on ‘cause I don’t know what I’m doing anymore (Izzy).

The kids have suffered. I try to do whatever I can for them like sports. I’ve got one boy just starting music this year and it is really very tight. If he doesn’t have music he will end up on the street as just another statistic. Why shouldn’t he be allowed to play sport or go and play music, which he really likes? You know and things like that? It makes it real hard and because of the stress in the household you do take it out on your children and I think that’s where it all stems from with children – with behavioral problems. It’s not their fault their parents are struggling, you know? (Belinda).

(Presbyterian Support Otago, 2002).

Needless to say neither staff nor clients can hide from the common impact of poverty at the foodbank. However, out of this struggle a synchronicity evolved turning the intractable issue of poverty into a synergy for practice change and development. This environment gave rise to a new frontier for social work delivery underpinned by time and curiosity but nurtured with respect and empathy.

**RECT: The development of a new practice model**

There is a tendency in many organisations, including social service agencies, to see the role of reception as important, but somehow separate from other stages of interaction and intervention. Within the food bank environment it is obvious to even the casual observer that the first point of contact with the client is extremely important. Clients tend to arrive in crisis, clearly humiliated and ashamed to be seeking help for food. How they are responded to in the first instance becomes absolutely critical.

Recognising this window of opportunity was a key factor in redeveloping a conceptual framework for intervention. Staff were determined that at the very least clients needed to leave the service feeling they have been treated respectfully and listened to. In order for this to occur the reception interaction has to be purposeful, even for the briefest of encounters. As staff talked about how to ensure relationships were started right from this entry point, an analysis was developed. In simple terms it seemed that once clients realised they would definitely leave with food and that they had been treated as an individual they relaxed and began to talk. Providing workers at this very beginning phase paid attention and asked questions that conveyed a sense of concern and understanding, clients seemed to gather strength and a new sense of purpose as they left.

At this stage, further possibilities were identified for improving the client’s situation, either through the client’s own efforts or by further agreed staff input. This initial engagement draws clients back to the service, small gains are achieved and the worker/client relationship develops. In time clients begin to tackle bigger issues and more challenging goals.

In practical terms the hierarchy of food bank assistance is food assistance, debt management, increased income, debt reduction, social functioning and well-being. In emotional terms it is being heard, acknowledged and encouraged to carry on. Tools essential for workers in this environment are interpersonal skills and an aptitude for advocacy, budgeting and problem solving. These ‘tools’ combined with availability and tenacity, provide the foundation for building the dimensions of respect, empathy, curiosity and time. These components form the basis of our practice model illustrated in Figure One over the page.
The following discussion explains the RECT practice model. Respect is about conveying that you value the other person as an individual in his or her own right by making a purposeful connection. It is the greeting without judgement, listening attentively and paying attention to detail, clarifying what the person wants and explaining what is possible. Respect acknowledges the issues as they are presented but doesn’t take them over, or attempt to minimise situations with deflection. Demonstrating respect is about allowing the situation and the person to be heard and accepted in the way that leaves the person feeling better for the telling, or the not telling as the case may be. Being respectful involves providing the client with choice as to when the time is right for intervention and having agency in terms of guiding the pace and style that intervention might take.

Having empathy is about displaying an understanding of where the person is at, without colluding with unacceptable behavior or imposing unasked for views, advice or solutions. Demonstrating empathy also entails being concerned enough to ask someone ‘how are things?’ and then listening carefully to their answer. It is also about being careful in the interaction so that the client can sense the concern, but not be overwhelmed by expectations or a sense of obligation. Empathy is the twin and constant companion of respect.

Demonstrating curiosity is about being interested and asking the dumb question that provides the bigger picture, broadens the context of the situation, and creates permission and energy for action. Being curious involves leaving assumptions aside, and checking out the seemingly obvious or the contradictory. As such, curiosity is driven by intuition. Observation and analysis both in the moment and on reflection are necessary. Curiosity creates energy for the staff, for the clients and for others who may be involved in the process. Genuine worker driven curiosity can be liberating and empowering, as it supports the clients in managing their story in a new way.

Using time is about working with a client over as long a period as necessary, without arbitrary limits on numbers of appointments or ‘best by’ dates. It is also about having the time to be with the client in their moment of distress when they first unburden themselves to this anonymous yet attentive stranger. Allowing time to pass with the ebb and flow of the client’s situation is also important. This occurs by accepting that there may be periods of relatively intense activity, interspersed with gaps of varying length while other things take priority or settle in the client’s life. Being timely in this way and judging the right moment is everything.

Community Welfare staff at Presbyterian Support Otago describe this approach to time as ‘muddling along’. Muddling along is using the passage of time as part of the intervention, and recognising the need for different people to work through things in an order and in ways that make sense to them. In so doing, having a sound relationship with a worker becomes an enabling and supportive factor that is very important for checking out, sounding off and gaining encouragement. The muddling along approach to intervention does not mean there is no direction or goal in the work. It is based on the premise that clients work best when they set the pace, and as such acknowledges the importance of events taking their course according to the circumstances and context.

**Small steps**

Many of the food bank clients appear to live in chaos, lurching from crisis to crisis and seeming to be inactive and even irresponsible in terms of taking control or attempting to shape their situations. Once a worker is able to set aside judgments about what they should or could do, and listen carefully to client stories, it is generally apparent that small steps represent huge achievements in the face of illness, adversity and struggle. Patterns built up over years do not disappear in days or months but do change slowly.

To the outsider or the uninitiated, this way of working may appear meandering, irrelevant or unproductive. We have learnt from the clients that muddling along is often the most sustainable way to consolidate positive change in the face of hugely complex multi-faceted issues. Encouraging incremental and evolutionary adjustments is the key to facilitating sustainable
change based on the client’s own sense of opportunity and direction. Where a worker
demonstrates the ability to work on the basis of respect, empathy, curiosity and time, and is
supported organisationally in muddling along, the likelihood of meaningful work occurring is
high.

This approach to client work has been further supported in recent research showing that the
quality of the relationship between the worker and client is the critical factor in facilitating
positive change (Duncan and Sparks, 2001). This has been our experience alongside the
recognition that the gift of allowing time to pass is also significant in today’s world of rationed
and commodified units of time. The RECT Model of Social Action was conceptualised through a
process of critical thinking and discussion, taking account of divergent practice applications and
theoretical tradition.

Organisational and theoretical influences

Throughout the process of developing the model, it became apparent that the input of people and
policies are integral to shaping theoretical perspectives and informing organisational aspirations
for effective practice. For many seasoned practitioners theory and practice quickly become
blurred. While there is often an intuitive use of theory in practice (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins,
2000), the hurly burly of work renders this knowledge implicit or in the background. Making the
links between theory and practice explicit relies on there being a reflective process through
supervision or workplace discussion and debate. Using this process of reflection helps workers
make sense of theory as it relates to the practice environment and their work with clients who
are considered the partners in change (Duncan and Sparks, 2001; Ife, 1997).

The Community Welfare team at Presbyterian Support Otago regularly has discussion around
advocacy and development of the work style highlighting the interplay of theory and practice.
This dialogical approach is in the best traditions of critical practice and central to making things
happen with and for clients across systems and structures. (Ife, 1997). The development of the
food bank work started with some articulation of general ideas and concepts. There was no
explicit theoretical framework but an ethos that good practice and theory emerge if the
environment is right.

Through the late 1990s and early 2000, Presbyterian Support Otago reviewed its Vision,
Mission Statement and Goals to include a stronger social justice emphasis. This review coincided
with the redevelopment of the food bank and the evolution of the Community Welfare team. The
vision reads: ‘Presbyterian Support Otago wants a fair, just and caring community for the people
of Otago’. The organisational values are ‘In fulfilling this vision we will endeavor to act with
Faith, Compassion, Respect, Integrity, Courage, Independence’.

The goals set for the welfare programme initially were to assist clients to regain control of
their situation and to improve their circumstances. This latter aim took in the notion of systemic
advocacy based on generalised trends and use of group and community interventions as well as
individual work. The organisation’s marketing by-line is ‘People Helping People in Otago’. These
aspirations may appear to reflect social work heaven with little prescription about how to make it
happen. However, Support’s organisational focus on working for social justice and an inclusive
community has a natural affinity with structural theory that focuses on the interaction between
the individual and the socio-economic structure (Fook, 1993). As such, the daily practice is
centered with the person in their world, and the systems that affect them. Equally, the
experience of staff in the food bank supported an analysis of clients as courageous and resilient
people who are disadvantaged and affected unfairly by economic and social policy. For example,
many of the clients are capable budgeters but simply do not get adequate income to survive with
a sense of well being through the benefit system.

This knowledge from practice meant that conventional interventions based on individual
deficit theory were confusing and at odds with the understandings of clients and relationships
staff had with them. As such the RECT Model of Social Action reflects an emphasis on
acknowledging structural disad-vantage while drawing on principles embedded within strengths-based practice (Saleeby, 1997).

Similarly, a lot of political debate is dismissive of the stories and experiences of those in poverty (Rich, 2003; Department Social Welfare, 1999). Nevertheless, through genuinely listening and responding to client stories using concepts of respect, empathy, curiosity and time, staff are inevitably led to a broader analysis of the presenting issues. The challenge in this evolving model of practice is to hold it against an explicit framework that supports intervention across the spectrum. The aim is to build upon the capacity of clients and create opportunities for change in organisations and systems. Additionally, there is an absolute conviction that reflecting and acting on the stories of clients is the way towards achieving social justice. The key in these efforts is engaging in meaningful partnerships with people with the view to making common sense of their world with them. The task is to then look for theoretical and practical pathways forward that are sustainable. In this way the Community Welfare team has engaged in praxis, where practice advances have informed theoretical development and vice versa (Freire, 1972; Ife, 1997).

At the macro level humanist and empowerment theory has influenced the development of our practice model. From a humanist perspective people are valued as individuals with unique and diverse stories, and this approach fits well with the experience and philosophical orientation of the food bank. In addition, the commitment to telling clients’ stories as a means of empowering clients and engendering public debate about poverty and social exclusion is congruent with humanism (Ife, 1997). This critical reflective practice makes overt the connections between personal troubles and public issues that are so often referred to in the literature (Burke and Harrison, 1998).

Conclusion

This article is the first of two tracing the evolving development of a practice model that reflects the contemporary context of current service delivery in some food banks. As a team the Community Welfare workers found simple ideas and activities reflect the working through of much complexity either intuitively or as a result of detailed planning and analysis. Muddling along with social work built on dimensions of respect, empathy, curiosity and time is not a new idea. However they are simple concepts that have become lost in the contemporary rush and the enthusiasm for constructs and specialisms that can be evaluated, measured or fitted to contract specifications.

The practice of social work associated with food banks has fresh opportunities to reflect client stories and to take action at micro, meso and macro levels of intervention. It is a model anchored on the quality of relationships, while at the same time working towards social justice. If issues of poverty and social isolation are to be tackled it is time for social action. The challenge to you as a practitioner is to take the time and enjoy the action.

Acknowledgements. I would like to acknowledge and thank the Community Welfare team at Presbyterian Support Otago for their ideas, energy and commitment to developing our model of practice and for muddling along with passion and purpose. In addition I would also like to acknowledge the steadfast support and encouragement received from NZCCSS, the Board, CEO and Community Mission Director of Presbyterian Support Otago, donors and volunteers who have made this work possible.

References