Biographical work

Links to theory

The biographical approach has its roots in sociology and social psychology, notably in 'symbolic interactionism'. It is concerned with how the individual sees and interprets the world and defines 'reality' for him or herself. The belief is that we all have an 'interpretive self', which helps us to discover 'who we are', in other words, our identity. This enables us to construct a story or 'biography' of ourselves, of how we came to be the person we are. This is a process of construction and reconstruction as life unfolds. In contrast to some classical Freudian ideas, which hold that identity is formed in early life and is relatively fixed, this approach emphasises the social processes involved in defining and redefining our 'selves'. This approach is sometimes described as constructive social work because of the emphasis on how the social world is constructed. There are links to feminist theory in recognising the diversities as well as the commonalities of women's experience.

Its use in social work

A great deal of social work is about listening to people, often people who are under stress or who are in crisis, who are struggling to survive or make sense of what has happened to them. This often involves 'telling the story of the events' to someone who is willing to listen. Social workers are also involved in taking 'social histories' for a variety of purposes, from reports for court, or to facilitate an adoption or foster placement. Those who work with older people, or people whose lives have been disrupted (for example, children in the care system), also work to help service users construct and reconstruct their 'life stories', often for therapeutic purposes.

Working biographically is not just about the facts of someone's history, but more about the exploration of meaning, and the discovery of identity. Many migrant groups who find themselves as minorities in a dominant culture often have to struggle to maintain or rediscover their identity. For example, older African-Caribbean people have worked with Black social workers to tell their personal and collective stories of arrival and struggle, to create an identity which affirms their cultural origins, but in a new context. Social workers have also been influenced by anti-racist theory to see the importance of helping young Black people to understand and affirm their identity as black, and what this means to them.

Narrative therapy concentrates on strengths and seeks to help service users to go beyond telling the same old story in order to construct new narratives and anticipate change. Work of this kind can help when events, often tragic, so radically transform a person's life that they have to re-evaluate the past and seek new meanings. For example, women who have discovered that their long-time male partners were sexually abusing their children may experience a crisis of identity, often centred on their ideas of themselves as 'good mothers'. Work may involve re-evaluation of past events, and time to explore their feelings of anger, helplessness and guilt.

K100 LINKS

Discussion particularly relevant to Biographical Work can be found in Units 14, 15 and 16.