

Abstracts

Social Work and Older People

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Michael E. Mor-Barak and Margaret Tyman, Older workers and the workplace: a new challenge for occupational social work. *Social Work: Journal of the National Association of Social Workers*, 38, 1 (1993), 45–55.

The United States' literature on occupational social work is prolific and this article is just one contribution to the growing body of knowledge on the subject. In contrast the United Kingdom has few studies on social work in the workplace, this domain being rather for the personnel officer. Although set in an American context, this article has relevance for social work and the delivery of social services to older people and their families in Britain and lessons too for the development of partnership between public and private sectors.

The trend toward early retirement, coupled with the diminishing numbers of youths entering the labour market as a result of lower birth rates, presents American industry with an impending shortage of workers. Concurrently, many older adults can anticipate a prolonged and healthy later life and are interested in continuing their productive involvement in society. Despite this interest, older adults face many difficulties in obtaining and retaining a job, the most important of which is age discrimination. The authors argue that ageism is presenting a challenge to occupational social work and argue that social workers who are trained in gerontology are well placed to respond to these problems. Companies need workers who have not previously been employed and the social work profession is in the position to offer its skills and ethics to help both older workers and businessmen to meet their own and each others' needs.

To support their argument the authors draw on demographic and labour force data. The baby boom generation are getting older; they are being succeeded by a declining number of younger people entering the workforce. Simultaneously there is a drop in the labour force participation of older workers who take the opportunity of early retirement. On the other hand older adults interested in continuing employment are motivated by several factors, particularly the need for income. Older workers are however more likely to lose their jobs in

times of financial stringency. The authors also argue that businesses cannot cope with the life events that older workers face, such as caring for an ailing spouse.

Existing programmes to enable older workers to remain in and to re-enter the workforce are few. In the United States they fall into two categories:

- a) programmes which facilitate linkages between older adults and potential employers, and
- b) programmes that accommodate the needs of older individuals in the work environment.

Linkage programmes, the authors tell us, are largely community based and focus on providing job referral, career counselling and retirement planning. A British audience will be familiar with these. However, programmes which accommodate older adults' needs are less visible. They include job modifications – sharing, flexi-time, flexible benefit packages – and training programmes that upgrade skills and are targeted at the older workers. Finally eldercare programmes assist employers with care responsibilities.

The final and most interesting section of the paper focuses on the implications for social work. The remit of the social work profession is to promote awareness of ageist stereotypes that are part of the American corporate culture. It is also to facilitate change through interventions. Several practical suggestions are made in relation to this strategy, including the recommendations that social workers should promote the hiring of older workers, and that emotional support and legal aid should be offered to older victims of age discrimination. Social workers trained in gerontology can provide management with information about demographic trends and their implications for an ageing society and can help management evaluate how current programmes and practices affect older workers and their families. Crisis intervention and bereavement counselling at particular times in the employee's life are also important areas for social work intervention. In conclusion social work intervention, by working with individuals, groups and work organisations to change attitudes and initiate policies can open up new options for older adults and work organisations.

COMMENT

This article is set in an American context and its transferability to the British social work scene should be treated with caution. However, there are points of value to the British practitioner. Similar shortfalls of younger workers will occur. In order to encourage the re-entry of women and the retention of older workers, employers will need to study

carefully a profile of their workforce and meet employees' needs to balance work and family life. Older workers in the workplace are more likely to be caring for an older adult; this group particularly need employment income and an eldercare programme. The rationale for public sector service intervention would be a preventive one – enabling employees to balance work and care averting crises. In this way support for carers would become a reality rather than political rhetoric. Although employers are reluctant to become involved in such employee assistance programmes, they offer an opportunity for a partnership between the public and private sectors of welfare.

Bridget Penhale, The abuse of elderly people: considerations for practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 23, 2 (1993), 1–12.

This article starts with brief reviews of the United Kingdom and United States literatures on abuse. A common problem is that the lack of a generally agreed definition of abuse has been one barrier to its identification, but Penhale proposes several additional reasons; for example, claims about the likely incidence of abuse in the United Kingdom are difficult to substantiate due to the lack of large scale research: identification is hampered by ignorance of the scale of the problem. Difficulties in detection also exist due to the comparative isolation of elderly people as well as the reluctance of victims to report the abuse.

One of the most interesting sections discusses the response of the professional social worker and their department. Professional ageism, she argues, is itself a barrier to identification and response to abuse as professionals 'approach the problems of older people rather more superficially than with other client groups'. She also states that professionals find it difficult to accept that an older person has the right as an adult to refuse assessment or intervention. The experience gained in child protection work can be transferred to elder abuse, and the article discusses their similarities and differences. However, although the differences between child and adult abuse are important to study, it is possibly more important to investigate the differences and similarities between particular types and forms of adult abuse as different responses may be necessary. The common factors, whatever the form of abuse of elderly people, are that abuse predominantly involves a female and occurs between older people themselves. The final section draws out the implications for practice and service delivery and relies heavily on the lessons learnt in child care. In terms of professional practice, there is a clear need for developing a model of

participation between carers, clients and professionals particularly in relation to decision making. A multi-disciplinary approach is also advocated. In terms of organisational issues, Penhale argues that any guidelines developed should be a tool for improved practice rather than an inhibiting factor. Training and support systems for staff are also seen as vital to an effective response.

COMMENT

There is nothing new or revealing in this article to those who work with and study older people. I disagree with the author in her statements on the lack of professional consideration in this area of practice. The last decade has seen the emergence of gerontology courses and post-qualifying training on the agenda of many social services agencies, and these have raised the profile of work with older people. Recent publications by Pritchard, Biggs and Phillipson, Glendenning and Decalmer have also provided rich training material on the subject of abuse.¹ Professional debates on rights and risks are all equipping the social worker to identify and respond in appropriate ways. However the article does provide a good summary of the state of our understanding of elder abuse. It also identifies the areas ripe for further research, e.g. how applicable are other models of family violence to situations of elder abuse? What the author briefly touches on and what is most significant in identifying further work is the extent to which culture, age and environment influence our understanding and response to this problem. Qualitative exploratory research is vital if we are to unravel the sensitive issues around elder abuse.

NOTE

- 1 Jacki Pritchard, *The Abuse of Older People: A Handbook for Professionals*, Jessica Kingsley, London, 1992; Chris Phillipson, Simon Biggs, Aled Griffiths and Gwyneth Roberts, *Understanding Elder Abuse: A Training Manual for Helping Professionals*, Longman, Harlow, Essex, 1992; Peter Decalmer and Frank Glendenning (eds), *The Mistreatment of Elderly People*, Sage, London, 1993.

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