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Learning from service users involvement: A research about changing stigmatizing attitudes in social work students

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Stigmatizing attitudes can create barriers to forming partnership with service users and to developing people's empowerment. So, social work education must help students overcome their stigmatizing attitudes. A useful strategy for bringing about changes is service users and carers involvement in social work education, providing students with direct exposure to stigmatized people in roles that emphasize their humanity and strengths, rather than their deficits. The present study assessed the impact of a one-day meeting with service users and carers members of self-help and mutual-aid groups on freshman social work students. Students completed an adapted version of AIMQ (Attitudes to Mental Illness Questionnaire) before and after the meeting, and answered several qualitative questions. Data comparisons suggest that after face-to-face contact with service users and carers social work students showed reduced stigmatizing attitudes. Implications for further research and social work education are discussed.

Keywords: Service users, carers, involvement, stigma, social work education, Relational Social Work, AIMQ

Social work and stigmatizing attitudes

Stigma is particularly important in social work because most if not all people social workers work with will be subject to some form of stigmatization. 'Simply being a client of a social worker is often enough to attract stigma' (Thompson and Thompson, 2008, p. 216). Furthermore, social work has an important tradition and role in supporting vulnerable populations and in fighting discrimination and stigma (Cree, 2013; Fook, 2012; Banks, 2008; Dominelli, 2002, 2008; Burke and Parker, 2007; Barnes, 2006; Thomson, 2006). Nevertheless, social workers often share the negative view of social problems that is so widespread among general population. Stigmatizing attitudes are not only present in society at large, but also in helping professions, including psychiatry, psychology and social work (Nordt et al., 2006; Trevithick, 2005; Schevett and Kim, 2004). Promoting users

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empowerment and partnership is pivotal to social work practice, but stigmatizing attitudes can create barriers to forming partnership and to empowering people. Therefore, it is vital that social work education helps students to overcome their stigmatizing attitudes (Zellmann et al., 2014) as means to develop a 'critical understanding of how socio-structural inadequacies, discrimination, oppression, and social, political and economic injustices impact human functioning and development at all levels, including the global' (Sewpaul and Jones, 2005: 220).

Various ways to decrease stigmatizing attitudes in general population (eg Galletly and Burton, 2011; Weiss et al, 2006; Corrigan and Penn, 2015; Heijnders and Van Der Meij, 2006; LeBel, 2008) and among professionals (e.g. Galletly and Burton, 2011) are described in literature. As direct contacts and personal relationships with those stigmatized seem particularly useful to reduce stigma (Corrigan, and Penn, 2015; Covarrubias and Meekyung, 2011), an important strategy for bringing about changes in professionals' perceptions of stigmatized people has been to involve the latter in education and training, providing students and practitioners with direct exposure to stigmatized people in roles that emphasize their humanity and strengths, rather than their deficits (Shor & Sykes, 2002; Scheyett and Kim, 2004).

Service users and caregivers involvement in social work education

Diffusion

In the last three decades, in the UK, service users and carers involvement in social work has become firmly embedded in important aspects of social work education (Edwards, 2003; Branfield, 2009; Taylor et al., 2009). In recent years, service users involvement in university programmes has been started in other European countries – as Denmark, Germany, Norway, Page 3 of 22

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Sweden, in Northern Ireland (Agnew & Duffy, 2010), Croatia (Skokandić & Urbanc, 2009), and in Eastern European countries (Zavirsek and Videmsek, 2009). As far as we know, in the [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] social work education system only two experiences can be found, that were carried out by the University of [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] and by the University of [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process], respectively.

Rationale

The involvement of service users and carers in social work education is thought of as promoting the more collaborative ways of working that contemporary social work theory and practice emphasize (Waterson & Morris, 2005), and as providing a balanced education capable of building a good professional practice in students, especially when service users are involved right from the beginning (Baldwin & Sadd, 2006; Tyler, 2006; Waterson & Morris, 2005). The central idea is that social workers must regard service users and carers as partners in dealing with their life difficulties. So, social workers should not regard them merely as recipients of interventions, but as people from whom to learn, both in professional practice and education.

Service users' everyday experiences are fundamental to equipping would-be social workers with key elements of knowledge and expertise and to improving services (Beresford, 2000; Anghel and Ramon, 2009). The exposition to service user perspectives also aims to help social work students, and freshmen especially, relate theory and practice (Cooper and Spencer-Dawe, 2006; Irvine at al. 2015).

Power sharing

In order to achieve an effective participation and to avoid the risks of a tokenistic approach,

general issues about how users' role could be presented and how programmes could be adjusted to promote effective changes in social work practice should be addressed (Askheim, 2012).

There is the risk that users could be seen as 'case studies' instead of partners, increasing the emphasis on the distance between 'us' (professionals) and 'them' (the users) (Wilson and Beresford, 2000; Beresford and Croft, 2008). Conversely, only if service users and carers feel respected for what they can offer, they are more able to share their perspectives (Anghel and Ramon, 2009, p. 187). When groups or organisations of users are involved, they are in a better position to effectively challenging conventional images of service users (Beresford & Boxall, 2012)

Involvement domains and methods

Service users and carers have collaborated with social work courses in different ways: as personal testimonies, educators, co-teachers, recruiters of students (Askheim, 2012). They have contributed by telling their stories and real-life experiences, as well as by producing written materials (Reynolds & Read, 1999) and videos (Smith, 2013). Gee et al. (2009) analysed what learning students had gained after spending 24 hours with service users and family carers. Quinney and Fowler (2013) described a participatory initiative carried out through online discussion groups run by users and carers.

Judkins and Lahurd (1999) underlined the importance of involving service users and carers in curriculum development and design, and not only as personal testimonies – they should be regarded as partners in developing educational programmes (Molyneux & Irvine, 2004). To this purpose, they may take part to a wide range of tasks, as students selection, development of teaching approaches and materials, programme planning, teaching and

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Though, service users and carers have been actively involved in assessing the readiness of freshmen students in social work for their first period of practice learning (Duffy et al., 2013) and in assessing students' achievement both in practice learning and in institution-based learning (Gee et al., 2009), more compelling evidence about the effectiveness of service users in such roles is needed (Skoura-Kirk, 2013). According to Gregor and Smith (2009), prior to involving 'service users as educators', their potential role and contribution, as well as their training needs, should be considered.

Recruitment and training

Involving service users and carers can mean working with individuals or working with groups and networks of service users and carers, with voluntary organisations (Health and Care Professions Council, 2014), with community organisations (Gupta & Blewett, 2008), with local activity centres (Askheim, 2012). This outreach work always takes time and requires careful preparation. It is essential to explain the initiative to the different individuals or organisations targeted, and to learn what they may offer, whom else they are involved with, and what their engagement conditions are (Levin, 2004).

Service users and carers may need support and training, particularly when they take part in student selection processes or assessment tasks (Brown & Young, 2008). Help with reading, understanding, and/or producing written may be necessary too (Gupta & Blewett, 2008).

Preliminary meetings among service users and carers enable them 'to present the views of the group, rather than just their own experiences, which can be emotionally difficult

for them and dismissed as unrepresentative by those receiving the training' (Gupta & Blewett, 2008: 468; Baldwin and Sadd, 2006; Irvine et al., 2015).

Outcome

Most authors argue that service users and carers involvement in social work education is extremely valuable to all parties (Brown & Young, 2008; Morgan & Jones, 2009; Irvine, Molyneux and Gillman, 2015).

Irvine et al. (2015) show that many students come to realize how keeping the service users' perspectives at the core of practice is paramount in order to actualize social work values. Thanks to service users' and carers' testimonies, awareness of the importance of human experience within the social and health service system has grown (McCusker et al., 2012). A student quoted by Smith (2013) said that he had learnt by service users the importance of being aware of how social workers' behaviour and attitude impact upon them.

Students acknowledged the importance of interacting with service users and carers away from their usual environments and roles (Benbow et al., 2011). The 'us-and-them' distinction between the parties dwindled (Askheim, 2012). Significantly for the purposes of the present article, it has been shown that the stigma associated with certain service user groups, particularly in relation to mental health, decreases. This occurs to varying degrees, depending on students' previous experience (Smith, 2013). One of the most important results of the project carried out in Northern Ireland by Coulter et al. (2013) was showing how this kind of initiatives appeared to increase students' awareness and capacity in a divided society. After talking with victims of violence and discrimination, students appeared more equipped to meet the requirements of such a society (Judkins and Lahurd, 1999).

Furthermore, learning by and with service users and carers develops communication skills (Skilton, 2011), and emphasises the value of listening (Branfield, 2009).

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There are indications that service users involved in social work education improve their confidence and self-esteem, arising from a sense of making meaningful contribution (McCusker, 2012; Benbow and coll. (2011). The significant literature review by Robinson and Webber (2013) underlined that little effort has been made to ascertain if the participation of service users in social work education actually improves outcomes for students. After analyzing 29 international studies, they showed that none of them addressed the effects on social work practices and only two measured change in social students' attitudes or in their perception of service users and carers.

The study presented in this article attempts to fill part of this gap by investigating the effects of a meeting between freshman students in social work and service users and carers in terms of reduction of stigma.

A full day meeting: Students and EBE together

Setting

For eight years the involvement of service users or ex-service users and carers as teachers has been an important part of the social work education programme at the [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] University.

Service users and carers participation is closely linked to the social work approach taught at the [name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] University, i.e. Relation Social Work. Relational Social Work (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007) stems from relational sociology (Donati, 2010) and focuses on relationships as the basis for change. The central idea in Relational Social Work is that change emerges from a reciprocal aid, both among people in difficult circumstances, family members, friends, neighbours, and between that network and the social worker. The practitioner helps the network to develop reflexivity and improve it in enhancing welfare, and – in turn – the network helps the practitioner to better understand how s/he can help it (Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2012).

In Relational Social Work, service users are considered as 'experts by experience' (McLaughlin, 2009; Preston-Shoot, 2007; Saleebey 1996), because they have experience of using care services, and especially because they are experts about their lives, and about their difficulties.

The meetings

The present study looks at a learning experience that was part of a Social Work Orientation Workshop [quote deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process] addressed to freshman students and aimed at providing them with an opportunity to know a life story and change their views of social problems and service users.

Every academic year, the University organizes a full day meeting between students and service users members of self-help and mutual aid groups, who are invited as 'experts by experience' (EBE). The program of the day is divided in two parts: in the morning each student talks individually with a service user for 2 hours. It is not a professional interview, but a simple conversation aimed at knowing each other and exchanging life experiences. After the lunch time shared together in the university canteen, all the participants (students and service users) meet together in 5 groups with about 15 EBEs and 15 students, to express thoughts and feelings about the experience. Every group was facilitated by one of EBEs.

In the academic year when the present research was carried out, the students met EBEs with experience in the following problems: mental health; drugs addiction; alcohol addiction; unemployment; disability; difficult partner divorce; parents of children in child protection; gambling addiction.

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Recruitment

EBEs were recruited through self-help and mutual-aid groups organizations, the so-called 'umbrella' organisations that gather a number of self-help and mutual-aid groups for the same type of problem, or many groups with different targets. EBEs must have been members of a self-help and mutual-aid group for at least a year.

Firstly, the initiative was presented to some key persons who had already contacts with the social work course and who were group facilitators. Then, the University sent a letter to each self-help and mutual-aid group, inviting all those who were interested in participating and suggesting to extend the invitation to other potentially interested groups.

A total of 80 members of self-help and mutual-aid groups participated to the full day meeting. This number can be seen as a significant success, since – according Levin (2004) – the number of individuals actively involved in social work education initiatives usually ranges from 4 to 20, with an average of 8-10.

The recruitment through self-help and mutual-aid groups organizations was chosen taking into account both the range of benefits arising from working in groups (highlighted above) and particularly what happens in this kind of groups. Self-help and mutual-aid groups produce strengths-driven processes promoting psychological insight and social skills (Steinberg, 2010). Self-help and mutual-aid groups imply an ongoing reflection on personal experiences, starting from the others', in a peer-to-peer logic. In this way, individuals can develop narrations and points of view enhanced by the other members' perspectives. When someone participates in a self-help and mutual-aid group for a period of time, s/he will not only elaborate his/her experience individually but s/he will also enrich it with the coping experiences of the other members. When motivated people who have lived similar experiences talk and listen to each other, they can develop a higher-standing life knowledge

that expresses the shared experience and is less contingent on individual circumstances. In a self-help and mutual-aid group the knowledge of individual members upgrades, just because it becomes shared knowledge (Raineri, 2011).

Thus, the student who meets an EBE listens to his/her life story, but in the dialogue between them the experiences of other people expert in coping with a particular difficulty also emerge. In this way the student does not listen only to the individual voice of an expert but listens to his/her experience revisited in the light of experiences of others.

Due to all these reasons, the experience in self-help and mutual-aid groups was considered as an excellent basis of competence for EBEs involved in social work education. Other minor issues were discussed with the key persons and with the workshop supervisors.

Research Method

The research hypothesis was that face-to-face contact with people coping with life difficulties would produce educational effects in the students, particularly by reducing the level of prejudice toward service users who are experiencing life problems.

The research aimed at exploring how this educational experience affected participants and at finding out, by means of a survey, if students' attitudes showed any change.

Students were administered an adapted version of the 'Attitudes to Mental Illness Questionnaire' (AMIQ - Cunningham et al. 1993; Luty et al. 2006), previously translated into Italian, both in the two weeks preceding the meeting (pre-test) and in the two weeks following it (post-test). The second administration included some additional qualitative questions. Students completed the questionnaire online.

The 5-item AMIQ has good psychometric properties and can be used in most situations (Luty et al. 2006). Respondents read short vignettes describing an imaginary service user and answer five questions for each vignette. Respondents are asked to rate how likely

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some consequent events are to occur on a 5-point Likert scale (from -2 = most likely, to +2 = most unlikely). The scores for the 5 questions are then added up, giving a total score that can range between -10 and +10. Low scores indicate negative attitudes.

The data collected by means of the questionnaire were analyzed through a statistical program to look for differences between pre- and post- results. Differences were calculated by subtracting each student's pre-test score from his/her post-test score.

The full-day meeting was part of the common academic activity, so all freshman students were expected to attend it. Responding to the questionnaire was discretionary and students did it anonymously. Each student was asked to insert an alphanumeric code that would allow us to make the pre-/post comparison.

Prior to the meeting, students were told that they would take part to an initiative aimed at gaining a better understanding of the life and difficulties of people who turn to social services. The online questionnaire came with a note giving assurance about anonymity and explaining that the research intended to gather information about some opinions and attitudes of the students.

The study was conducted with the freshman students of the Catholic University (Milan, Italy) in 2014. A total of 100 students participated. Most of them (90%) were female and Italian. The mean age was 20 years. 45% of them came from technical college and 55% from high schools.

Findings

The hypothesis of the present research, i.e. that after face-to-face contact with EBEs students' attitudes toward service users would improve, was supported by the findings of pre-test/post-test analyses. The data obtained through the first and second administration of the AMIQ are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Pre-test and post-test scores [Table 1 near here]

Post-test mean scores differ from pre-test mean scores for all the vignettes, with the only exception of the disability vignette. The mean AMIQ scores improved from -0.45 prior to the meeting with EBEs to +0.25 after that meeting, with a mean difference of +0.70.

Through a second analysis, participants were divided into percentiles on the basis of their total score at the pre-test. Three groups were identified: with a high, medium, and low level of prejudice. It is apparent that the increase in mean scores is due to improvement by students with lower scores (i.e. students in the sample who initially had a high level of prejudice).

As Table 2 shows, change scores for this group of students are up to 2.71 for the vignette about schizophrenia, and up to 1.37 in total.

 Table 2 Pre-test and post-test scores for students who initially had a high level of prejudice

 [Table 2 near here]

Qualitative data collected by asking some questions during the second administration of the AMIQ revealed that participants appreciated the experience of meeting the EBEs, following which they were able to identify some key concepts for social work practice.

Students' answers confirmed that they had improved their personal attitudes toward service users:

"I have learnt more about drug addictions, revising my wrong ideas"

"I found out that these people have a problem, but are not a problem".

The answers to the qualitative questions suggested that students' stigmatizing views of service users as bad or lacking people were questioned after meeting them:

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"Prior to the meeting I was worried, but now I have to say that service users are strong and brave people."

"When I will become a social worker it will be important for me to treat each service user as a unique person, giving him/her the chance to change and avoiding to focus on past events."

"Service users are people who take on the challenge of starting a new life. They are people from whom we can and we have to learn."

For future practitioners engaged in human relationships, these statements are meaningful, because being able to suspend one's own conjectures and judgments, and to set aside one's own feelings and free associations in order to recognize the otherness will be essential for them (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

Furthermore, students underlined that they needed to improve their personal reflexive abilities:

"I learned that prior to expecting other people to change I have to question myself." "To become a good social worker I need to work deeply on myself, coping with my worries, understanding my limits and my resources."

To the question 'Was the meeting a positive, negative or neutral experience for you?', none of the students answered 'negative', two students answered 'neutral', and most of them expressed enthusiasm and satisfaction.

Discussion

Overall, the findings of the present study are encouraging. Data suggest that meeting face-toface with people who are expert in coping with their own life difficulties had positive effects on social work students. Change scores show a reduction of stigma for almost all the vignettes presented in the AMIQ.

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The only exception showing no improvement was the situation of a man with disability (Claude). It is possible that the students who talked with people with disability or their relatives during the meeting had already a good understanding of the everyday difficulties of living with a disability, so their attitudes did not change significantly.

Interestingly, stigmatizing attitudes seem to have decreased not only with reference to the problems of which the EBEs had a personal experience (and about which, then, they talked with the students during the meeting) but also with reference to the situation of Robert (offender), that had no correspondence to any of the self-help and mutual-aid groups involved.

Despite the pre/post improvement, Robert was by far the most stigmatized character in the opinions expressed by our sample of students. Therefore, particular attention will have to be paid in addressing prejudice toward offending people and, if possible, it may be useful to involve in future meetings also EBEs who have experienced this kind of difficulty.

For the students of our sample, the full day meeting with the EBEs was one of the first opportunities to interact with service users. Qualitative findings of the present study suggest that this encounter has some characteristics of a relational and dialogical practice culture. It is a brief intervention that may have a significant impact on students. The students of our sample pointed out how this kind of experience could help them recognize users' value, respect their identities, and facilitate empowerment and participatory approaches.

Limits

The most obvious limitation of the present study is the lack of a comparison group. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the decrease in students' stigma was entirely or mainly due to the meeting with the EBEs, though it may be reasonably assumed. Moreover, it was not assessed if and how long the changes in students' attitudes last. Future studies could address this issue.

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It would be both interesting and important, for future research, to gather EBEs' opinions and perceptions about their engagement. The vast and enthusiastic participation by service users and carers that has been observed over the years suggests that this activity benefits EBEs too.

Conclusions

Participants to the meeting expressed satisfaction and appreciation about this initiative. Besides, data suggest that the full day meeting was effective in reducing stigmatising attitudes and mistrust towards people who have personal and social problems.

Stigmatising attitudes towards people with mental illness, drug addiction, or offenders are commonly reported among professionals. It is widely recognized that in order to become effective and morally upright social workers it is essential to develop some abilities related to human, relational, and personal skills (Schön, 1983; Wilkes, 1985; Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995; Thompson, 2002; Trevithick, 2005; Banks, 2008; Barnes, 2006). Promoting face-toface contact with experts by experience may be an effective strategy to reduce dangerous feelings of anger, mistrust, and discrimination.

To think of people who are living life problems as 'experts by experience' it is necessary to recognize their power, their abilities, and their feelings, irrespective of the resolution of problems. Furthermore, for social work professionals, the obligatory way to 'create' power is to take a step back and relinquish some of their own power (Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2012). Social work education has the responsibility of encouraging students' awareness about the need to establish fully collaborative relationships with service users, co-creating help interventions. The reciprocity of help – letting the user be an equal and help the social worker – is not an empty slogan or a luxury. It is a radical turning point (Folgheraiter, 2012) because, if this reciprocity is absent, the help withers and dies (Beresford and Croft, 2004).

This study confirms that social work education can be enhanced through the participation of service users as 'experts by experience'. Given that in a true helping relationship both human agents aid each other (Pettersen and Hem, 2011) and that both experts and interested parties should work together in a synergic search for a common good (Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2012), learning from service users is for would-be social workers a valuable educational opportunity at the first steps on their path.

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VIGNETTE	PRE TEST MEAN (sd)	POST TEST-MEAN (sd)	CHANGE SCORE
John (cocaine)	-1.51 (2.84)	-0.68 (3.15)	+0.83
Tom (depression)	+0.52 (2.74)	+0.84 (2.69)	+0.32
Stefano (alcohol)	+0.05 (3.63)	+0.96 (3.42)	+0.91
Robert (law problems)	-5.43 (2.53)	-4.39 (2.82)	+1.04
Michael (schizofrenia)	-1.39 (3.29)	-0.17 (3.35)	+1.22
Claude (disability)	+5.22 (2.75)	+5.17 (2.61)	-0.05
Paul (birth parent of a child in foster care)	+0.4 (3.93)	+1.07 (4.09)	+0.67
Luke (gambling addiction)	-1.42 (2.75)	-0.81 (3.53)	+0.61
TOTAL	-0.45	+0.25	+0.70

Table 1 Pre-test and post-test scores 199x150mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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VIGNETTE	PRE-TEST MEAN (sd)	POST-TEST MEAN (sd)	CHANGE SCORE
John	-3.14 (2.39)	-2.32 (2.52)	+0.82
(cocaine)	-5.14 (2.59)	-2.52 (2.52)	+ 0.82
Tom	-0.82(2.77)	$\pm 0.36(2.51)$	+1.18
(depression)	-0.82 (2.77)	+0.36 (2.51)	+1.18
Stefano	-2.46 (3.40)	-0.61 (3.63)	+1.85
(alcohol)			
Robert	-6.96 (1.68)	-5.39 (2.48)	+1.57
(law problems)			
Michael	2 80 (2 85)	-1.18 (3.18)	+2.71
(schizofrenia)	-3.89 (2.85)	-1.18 (3.18)	+2.71
Claude	+3.96 (3.34)	+4.46 (2.60)	-0.50
(disability)			
Paul	-1.68 (3.67)	-0.68 (3.36)	+1.00
(birth parent of a child in foster care)	-1.08 (5.07)	-0.00 (5.50)	1.00
Luke	3 43 (2 50)	2 11 (3 24)	+1.32
(gambling addiction)	-3.43 (2.50)	-2.11 (3.24)	+1.32
TOTAL	-2.30	-0.93	+1.37

Table 2 Pre-test and post-test scores for students who initially had a high level of prejudice 199x150mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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