

COLLABORATION IN SOCIAL WORKERS' INFORMATION BEHAVIOUR: A VALUABLE ASSET FOR THE PROFESSION

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Niamh is a lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Studies at Maynooth University where she teaches social policy, evidence-based policy, life course policies and research. As a social work research educator for many years, Niamh undertook an innovative study of social work information behaviour as part of her doctoral studies. This article is drawn from this study.

Abstract

Social work today relies on the flow of good quality, reliable information to support practice. In order to maximise the profession's relationship with information, understanding of social workers information behaviour is essential. Studying how social workers need, seek, acquire and use information to inform practice elucidates what works for practitioners in engaging with information. This article, drawn from a larger study of social workers' information behaviour, highlights one of the key strategies of practitioners – collaboration. Participants in the study demonstrated a notable level of collaboration in the way they sought information, drawing on each other's resources and knowledge. Information acquisition was characterised by a high level of information sharing, and even after information was acquired, onward sharing of information represented a characteristic of practitioners' information usage. Capitalising on this practice of information collaboration, which is already embedded in the profession, represents a valuable asset for the professions' engagement with information.

Keywords: Information behaviour; collaboration; social work; information stars.

Introduction

Like many, if not all professions today, the

practice of social work relies on the flow of good quality, reliable information to support practice. From basic factual information about services to evidence-based research findings, information is integral to social work. If the profession is to capitalise on its relationship with information a clear understanding of social work's information behaviour is essential.

Information behaviour (Wilson, 1997), a field of study from information science, refers to how people, or in this case practitioners, engage with information e.g. What information needs arise for social workers? What needs do they address? How do social workers seek information? How do they acquire information? And, most importantly, how do social workers put the information to use to support practice. Exploring these dimensions of social work information behaviour elucidates what works for social workers in terms of maximising the benefits of information.

This article, based on a broader study of social workers' information behaviour, highlights one of the key characteristics of practitioners' engagement with information i.e. collaborative information behaviour. The practice of collaborative education emerged as one of the defining features of social work information practices.

Methodology

The overarching study (Flanagan, 2013) from which this article is drawn used a three-phase, mixed-method design to explore the information behaviour of social workers. A purposive sample of sixteen social work practitioners, drawn proportionately from the nine largest fields of social work in Ireland at the time, participated in the study. These practitioners participated in a small-scale study which gathered qualitative data using audio-diaries followed by critical incident technique interviews to elucidate how practitioners engage with information to support their practice. Participants, engaged in audio-diary compilation for two working weeks. An annotated transcript of diaries was returned to participants and formed the basis of critical incident technique interviews. Findings from these initial phases were used to inform a large-scale quantitative e-survey of over 450 social workers, in order to map the profession's information base. As a multi-site study, ethical approval/exemption was provided by four research ethics committees.

Collaborative Information Behaviour

Analysis of the participants' information practices captured how social workers respond to information needs; how they seek information to address these needs; how they acquire the information and ultimately put it to work in their practice. Across these four dimensions of information behaviour the practice of collaborative information behaviour emerged as a key characteristic of the social work profession.

The purpose of social workers' information engagement

While the largest single reason that social workers seek information is to inform a

case, a substantial function of information practices among study participants involved collaboration: either seeking information to support or inform a colleague's work; or receiving unsolicited information from a colleague. Informal sharing of information was a more significant feature than the formal sharing that takes place in meetings or info-share events.

Collaborative information seeking

Literature suggests that, typically, managers ask others to undertake information seeking on their behalf due to work demands and time constraints (MacDonald et al, 2011). This will resonate with social workers as the current small-scale study found that half of all social work information seeking involved asking for the required information. Most commonly, participants asked their colleagues for the information. This is supported by findings from the study's large-scale e-survey of social workers which identified team colleagues as one of the top-three sources of information.

Seeking by asking covers a vast range of practices. It may be a simple ask-receive scenario e.g.

[A named service] may be a better suited service to [one of our young service users]. I contacted [the service] to ascertain if the address for this family would be within their catchment [area] and they have informed me that it is ... I hope to go back to the family and to advise them of perhaps another option in terms of receipt of services.

Alternatively, it may involve liaising with multiple interpersonal sources before the information need is resolved.

A little girl [was] admitted ... and it's complicated because it may have been a non-accidental injury. So, I've had a lot of liaison with [external] social workers. ... There are an awful lot of... custody issues between the parents, [resulting in] community care ... and the Guards [being involved]. So, we've had to get a lot of information [from the social workers, community care, and Gardaí as] there are legal procedures going on ... and the other piece ... is about who should get the [child benefit]. ... So, we've just got all that information and [are] deciding how to proceed with the situation ... trying to untangle [all the issues].

Who seeks information?

Although the vast majority of social workers seek information to inform their practice, there is considerable variation in the level of seeking. A couple of participants emerged as super seekers, engaging in notably more information behaviour than others. The fact that these super seekers excel at this aspect of practice is in no way to suggest that all social workers should be super seekers. It is equally important to recognise that those who excel in other aspects of social work practice are using their valuable skills to equal effect.

Collaborative information acquisition

Although seeking information is undertaken with a view to acquisition of information, not all searches yield information. Similarly, information is not only acquired through seeking, but also results from unsolicited sharing of information. Indeed, in the current study as much as a fifth of information was acquired as a result of someone sharing information with a social worker e.g.

Colleagues [gave the team] a presentation on a workshop ... they recently attended by an American clinician who spoke at length of his experience of working with men who had perpetrated domestic violence and about the implications of that for power relations in a therapeutic context. I made a note of the issues ... and reviewed my own practice as a result. I engaged in discussion at the [team] meeting about it.

Although much of the information sharing was verbal, the primary channel for unsolicited information was via e-mail, and in-house colleagues proved to be the most frequent source.

Networking as a source of information also featured in the diaries of some participants e.g.

There's a strong network of organizations [a local area partnership] that work within this area. ... Every now and again I would say "OK I'm going to go out and meet somebody". So I go and meet a couple of organizations that I haven't met before, and I don't know what they do. I would try to take onboard a few times a year to do a little bit of 'OK who else is out there'.

The larger scale e-survey also highlighted the value social workers place on networking via seminars, meetings and training as sources of information.

Collaborative use of information – Sharing

While the principal focus of this study was to identify the ways in which social workers used information to inform practice, an unanticipated finding was the amount of sharing of information which participants engaged in over and above application of the information to practice. Participants shared

almost half of the information they acquired. This feature of social workers' information behaviour prompts a number of questions about sharing practices.

Why do social workers share the information they have acquired?

Some sharing of information was in response to a request, for example

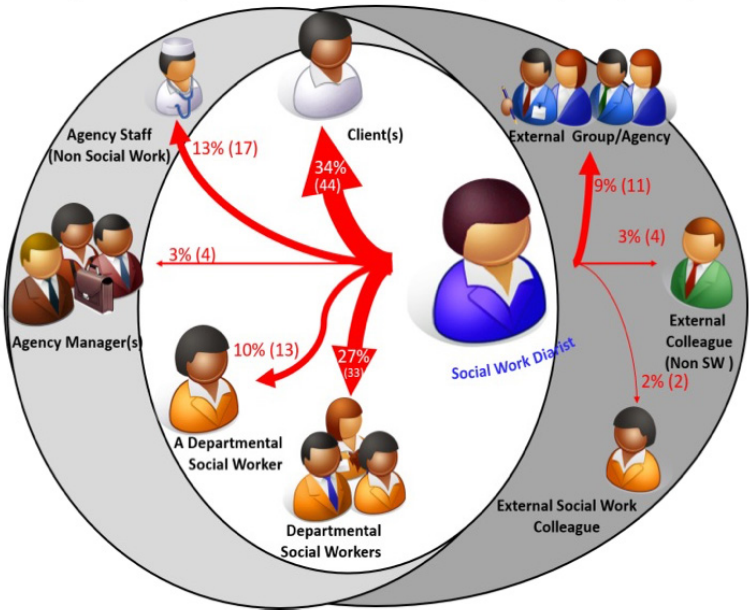
[The] Manager of a youth club made contact with me this morning looking for information on what to do in relation to ... a disclosure made by a young person. ...He was aware that I had [done child and family] casework in the past [although not now]. ... I suggested He phone the duty social

worker; [I provided information on] how to handle the situation; ... how to manage the young [people] ... involved in the allegation.

Other sharing of information was more altruistic, in response to a perceived interest or need in others e.g.

[I got an] e-mail from the IASW in relation to a training day all around counselling and the impact counselling can have on people's lives. My action was to send the e-mail to our administrator for printing and to place it in our training folder in case it's of interest to anyone in the department.

Figure 1: Recipients of Information Shared by Participants (n=128)



Note: As information was, on occasion, shared with more than one category the number of recipients is larger than the number of sequences where information was shared.

Who do social workers share information with?

Excepting clients, with whom social workers shared most information, the primary recipient of information shared by participants was the social work department/team, or a team colleague. However, sharing of information was not confined to the team, or indeed the agency (Figure 1): Participants shared information with other agency staff such as Psychologists, OTs, or Medics and, albeit less frequently, management e.g.

[I have] been working on an ongoing basis on a leaflet for patients that are on methadone programmes or are drug or alcohol misusing. ... [I have] looked for feedback from the [Departmental] team before and brought it to the relevant social workers in [allied agencies]. ... I'm going to show it to the Drugs Liaison [staff member] too.

Information sharing beyond the agency was relatively strong with a seventh of information sharing occurring with external personnel such as inter-agency bodies, professional networks or interest groups.

How useful is unsolicited information?

In light of the prevalence of sharing it is reasonable to ask: how useful is unsolicited information? The content of shared information, is a mixed bag, dominated by updates on services. The information is typically informal with few references to formal literature. However, while the shared information itself may be less formal, half of these instances of unsolicited information prompted information searching on the part of the recipient and a substantial amount of unsolicited information is shared onward.

This suggests that unsolicited information is valuable both as information per se, and as a trigger to seeking information.

Do All Social Workers Share Information?

All social work participants engaged in sharing of information. However, the propensity to share information appears to be quite individual and the amount of sharing undertaken by participants varied from 8% to 71% of the information they received. In fact, three super sharers accounted for half of all the sharing undertaken by participants.

Although numbers were small, overlap was observed between super seekers and super sharers. These are colleagues who are particularly good at sourcing information and upon whom people rely for information. These colleagues might be described as Information Stars (Allen & Cohen, 1969), representing valuable pathways to information for their colleagues. These people may make greater use of individuals outside the organisation, or read professional literature more than other team members. These information stars do not appear to map onto any consistent pattern of organisational placement or hierarchy (Koenig, 2010), suggesting that the propensity to be an information star is more personality or capacity determined, than job driven (Heinström, 2003).

The information star personality type represents a key asset to the profession. Super seekers' personality characteristics which predispose individuals to acquisition of information include being open, curious, with enhanced receptivity, secure and positive emotionality (Pálsdóttir, 2010; Mikulincer, 1997). Marshall and Bly (2004) noted that this profile is also typical of super sharers supporting the findings of the current small-scale study.

Embedding Collaboration in Practice

The larger-scale e-survey also revealed setting-specific differences in practices of mutual-education, with medical and mental health settings availing of more info-share resources and opportunities than other social work settings. Some departments have more formalised and active systems for information sharing, while in other settings team-driven sources such as resource folders, case presentations, inter-agency meetings and sharing of event documents remain on the 'wish-list' of the information base. In these circumstances the presence of an information star is a clear advantage.

Child and family social work settings did not appear to have as many established team-driven mechanisms for sharing. It is therefore encouraging to note that the concept of information stars has been adopted by Tusla Child and Family Agency, as part of its research strategy and it has rolled out a Research and Information Mentor Strategy as a mechanism to support and promote information sharing in social work practice (Tusla, 2016; 2017). One Principal Social Worker who is a Tusla Research Mentor reported:

I see my primary role as being a resource and a support to SW staff, Social Care Staff and Family Support Practitioners who are interested, have the drive, enthusiasm and time to undertake research projects that have a usefulness and applicability to their local team and their own professional development. My aspiration is that in my current role, that I can support colleagues to develop the skill and confidence in this applied research that is relevant to their role and the team they are part of (Tusla, 2018).

At the time of writing, 22 Research and Information Mentors (RIMs) were in place across the disciplines and regions of the organisation (Tusla, 2018) and a further 14 have undertaken RIM training. More recently the HSE has established a Research and Development Function which also aims to use 'collaborative mechanisms' to contribute to a joined-up response to research and information needs (HSE, 2018).

Conclusions

This study clearly identified collaboration as a feature of social workers' information behaviour, with collaboration evident across the key dimensions of information behaviour: seeking, acquisition and use. However, the study noted that the nature and frequency of sharing may not be common across the profession, rather the propensity to share is more individual capacity- and personality-driven, indicating evidence of information stars among practitioners. Strategies being pursued by state agencies such as Tusla and the HSE to capitalising on such practitioners offer promise and could be augmented by highlighting the best practice procedures for information sharing that are already in place in some social work departments around the country. Collaboration continues to be the principal asset of social work in navigating the information age and this study would appear to suggest that practitioners have already harnessed this potential and social work needs to continue doing what it does best.

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