**TASK-CENTRED PRACTICE**

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Task-centred practice is a systematic way of working with people to help with their problems. It is a professional *practice method,* first developed in the United States in the field of social work (Reid and Shyne, 1969; Reid and Epstein, 1972), and then adapted to other contexts, such as the UK (Doel and Marsh, 1992) and other disciplines and activities, such as educational supervision (Caspi and Reid, 2002).

As a practice method it is related to the broad family of problem-solving methods, such as the positive psychology movement and solution-focused practice (both of which it predates). It draws primarily from systems theory and learning theory, though – as an overarching structure for practice – it is able to encompass practices that are based on a wide variety of sociological, psychological, educational and ecological sources.

*Step by step approach*

Based on extensive research into long-term casework, task-centred practice was developed as a specifically short-term method, though it is possible to use it repeatedly over a longer period (a series of ‘contracts’) or for it to be used alongside other longer-term methods.

Broadly, the method starts with a comprehensive exploration of problems from the service user’s perspective. In contemporary parlance we would describe this as ‘telling the story’, where people are invited to describe and reflect on the nature of their problems very widely. Sometimes there might be one obviously pressing and central problem (but it might have many different components), and in other cases there might be a number of different problems (though often connected to one another). The practitioner uses open questioning techniques, using ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘who’, what’ and ‘how’ to arrive at the detail of the problem. ‘Why’ is important, too, but only as to why the problem is a problem in the here and now; not the kind of ‘why’ that becomes a long causal chain. In other words, ‘why are we here?’ (‘to help each other as best we can’), not ‘why are we here?’ (‘we evolved out of a primaeval soup’).

There might be problems that are recognised by the practitioner but not by the service user (for instance, around the care of a child in the family). If these have not been mentioned by the service user, the practitioner is allowed to introduce ‘additional problems’ and explore them, too. At the end of this stage, both the service user(s) and the practitioner should have a good understanding of the nature of the problems and they use this understanding to select a problem (or three at the most) that they agree they will work on to improve. If needs be, this can be a combination of problems identified by the service user and problems identified by the worker.

Once the ‘target problem’ has been agreed, the worker and the service user discuss a possible goal. The goal must be related to the problem, but it is not necessarily the ‘opposite’ of the problem. For instance, if the target problem has been defined as ‘we have a poor relationship’, the goal might be ‘we want to have a better relationship’ (the opposite) or, preferably something like ‘we want to spend more leisure time together and make joint decisions’. These latter goals are more specific than the general ‘we want a better relationship’ and, therefore, they are more measurable. This tends to make success more observable.

A time limit is agreed – one that is reasonable given the scope of the goal – and the likely frequency of sessions between now (when this agreement or ‘contract’ is made) and then (when the goal is expected to be achieved). At each of the sessions, the worker and the service user(s) will agree what tasks need to be completed between this session and the next; and, at the beginning of each session, they review progress on the tasks agreed at the previous session. Each task should take the service users a step closer to their goals. Each task should be done by the service user unless it is a task that only the worker can do (such as securing some resources); some tasks might be repeated from session to session and some tasks might be completed within the session itself (such as a rehearsal of how the service user might confront a problem involving another person).

The last session consists of an evaluation of progress. To what extent has the goal been achieved? Looking back, was this the ‘right’ goal? What part have the service users played in achieving their goal? How will they use this experience to tackle problems in the future? etc. The last session has been anticipated from the very beginning of the work and this leads to the ‘goal gradient effect’; in other word, the closer you get to a deadline, the more focussed your concentration tends to be. So having deadlines for tasks along the way helps to get them completed successfully, and the same for the overall goal.

*Bigger meanings*

Task-centred practice is not about mindlessly completing tasks. When conducted well, it helps service users think about the *meaning* of their problems and aspirations. This is best illustrated when progress on tasks is being reviewed at the beginning of each session. This is not a ‘tick box’ exercise (‘did you do it?’ ‘did you not do it?’) What is much more important than success/failure at the task is the learning that the service user gained from attempting or not attempting the task. Sometimes a ‘failed’ task can provide much more self-learning than a successfully completed one. The practitioners use their skills to help service users discover more about themselves and their relationship with others through the structure and discipline of the task-centred framework.

Task-centred practice is, itself, founded on a bigger meaning or belief. This simple example will indicate whether you are a ‘natural’ task-centred practitioner:

*If a ball of wool has become tangled, do you believe that you can untangle it and keep it untangled without knowing how it was tangled in the first place?*

If your answer is yes you will probably be attracted to task-centred practice; if it is no (i.e. you think you need to know how it got tangled to keep it from re-tangling), task-centred practice is probably not for you. (What research we have suggests that the first answer, yes, has the most validity!)

*Difficulties using the method*

The method is relatively easy to understand (and the service user needs to gain an understanding of the method for best results) – but, unexpectedly, rather more complex to practise. First, the balance of responsive and systematic communication takes real practitioner skill – for instance, to what extent to let the focus drift to other topics that the service user wants to visit and to what extent to keep the focus on the agreed problems, tasks and goals? How much to use task-centred *approaches* rather than the full discipline of the method – how much is lost and how much gained by that kind of flexibility?

However, the biggest challenge comes from the procedural nature of much current practice, often summed up as ‘managerialism’, and the tight recording protocols that allow for little professional manoeuvre. The author’s (Doel) own task-centred practice was supported by a set of record forms that he and a group of task-centred practitioners devised (carbonated so they could be used there and then with service users, leaving the top copy for the client, a second copy for the worker and the third copy on the file). It is hard now to see an agency allowing its workers to devise their own recording format based on a professional practice method, and agreeing to fund it. The decline of practice methods in general is a mark of the decline of professionalism in the face of procedure-bound practice. But change is possible, indeed change is ubiquitous, so we can hope that there will be a resurgence of profession-led practice. The need for task-centred practice has not declined.

*References*

Caspi, J. and Reid, W.J. (2002), *Educational Supervision in Social Work: A Task-centered model for Field Instruction and Staff Development,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Doel, M. and Marsh, P. (1992), *Task-centred Social Work*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Reid, W. J. and Epstein, L. (1972), *Task-Centred Casework*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Reid, W. J. and Shyne, A.W. (1969), *Brief and Extended Casework*, New York: Columbia University Press.

*Further reading*

For, an introductory account of the task-centred method and a running case example illustrating its use, see:

**Doel, M. and Marsh, P. (1992), *Task-centred Social Work*, Aldershot: Ashgate.**

For a comprehensive book that considers not just the task-centred model but teaching and learning the practice, offering supervision and researching practice, see

**Marsh, P. and Doel, M. (2005), *The Task-Centred Book,* London: Routledge/Community Care**