**Motivational Interviewing and Social Work Education: the power of relationship based practice.**

**Abstract:**

Motivational interviewing is increasingly being recognised as an effective intervention within health and social care settings. It has an established evidence base which appeals to commissioners of services in this time of austerity and also has links with relationship-based practice which has seen a resurgence in the literature in recent years. This article outlines the key principles of motivational interviewing and the influences that can assist behavioural change and explores how this approach can be transferred to practice education. It suggests that motivational interviewing, which is founded on principles of person- centred and partnership working, can be utilised by both health and social workers who operate as practice educators. In order accurately to assess the knowledge and skills of students in accordance with the requirements of the relevant professional body, practice educators need effectively to engage with students. This article suggests that adhering to the ‘spirt’ of motivational interviewing and adopting some of the tools and techniques which form the basis of this approach, can assist practice educators to develop effective relationships with students. Adhering to the principles and philosophy of motivational interviewing in supervision sessions can assist practice educators to develop student confidence, self-awareness and if necessary engage in a process of change.

The use of motivational interviewing (MI) within a variety of social work settings has increased. This intervention was first used by substance misuse practitioners in the early 1980s (Miller 1983) and it is now widely considered to be effective in a number of health and social care settings that include domestic abuse (Wahab 2005)andthe criminal justice system (Hohman, 1998). Due to the current fiscal climate there is a demand for both social care and health professionals to apply evidence –informed principles to their practice and as stated above, MI has an established evidence base in a range of settings (Hohman 1998, Rubak et al 2005, Miller and Rollnick 2013).

So what exactly is MI? In the third edition of their book ‘Motivational Interviewing’ published in 2013, Miller and Rollnick provide the following definition:

‘Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person’s own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.’ (pg. 29).

So, in essence, MI is based on the idea that talking and understanding builds in people the motivation to change their lives in a constructive way. Social work education emphasizes the importance of effective communication skills for students (Hennessesy 2011 and Koprowska 2014) and indeed many programmes devote entire modules to developing effective communication skills (Dixon 2013). When asked, it is common to hear applicants for social work programmes suggest they have been informed that they are ‘good at listening to other people’ during the interview process when talking about their strengths. Indeed many people who find themselves in the helping professions state that they enjoy talking and conversing with others (Hohman 2012). This may be a contributing factor to the accessibility of MI and it may go some way to explain why it is has been embraced internationally by large numbers of social work practitioners.

MI is an approach which is flexible enough to be used as part of both the assessment and intervention processes and it can be used with both individuals and groups. A further strength of MI is its cultural sensitivity (Hohman 2012) as it can be used with diverse groups of service users and carers. It also sits comfortably with social work values as it is not an invasive or judgmental approach.

MI has been used by the business community as a sales tool, and Miller and Rollnick, the creators, in the third edition of their seminal text ‘Motivational Interviewing – Helping people change’ (2013), argue against it being employed in this way and emphasize the importance of practicing in a way that is congruent with the spirit of MI. They suggest that, in order to practice within the spirit of MI, practitioners need to work in partnership with users of services, offer acceptance and compassion and adopt an approach that is based on utilizing an individual’s strengths. All of these are compatible with both national and international social work values and the codes of conduct. Its use enables practitioners to meet the values and standards of proficiency of many health and social care professionals*.*(HCPC 2012,BASW 2012, College of Social Work 2012, International Federation of Social Work 2014).

Translating this to the practice education setting, there are clear parallels. Utilizing some of the tools and techniques that MI offers can assist practice educators to undertake an anti-oppressive approach to supervision and the assessment of students. Rogers (2002) suggests that adult learners have different needs from those of children and bring to education a range of experiences and values from their childhood which may be both positive and negative. It is often the intimate relationship that is developed in supervision with the practice educator that enables students to explore their previous experiences and consider how these may be affecting their ability to learn. Students often bring with them expectations about the learning process, and expect to be ‘taught’ and it often falls to social work educators to support students to develop other ways of learning that fall outside of the traditional teacher-student didactic relationship.

In many settings where social work is practiced, the emphasis is on supporting both users of services and carers to change their behaviour and/or their circumstances in order to improve the quality of their life and those of the people who are important to them. This is where a transfer of skills is often required from the experienced social work practitioner who moves into the practice educator role. Adopting the spirit of MI, together with some of its tools and techniques, may be helpful to them in their work with students.

The role of the practice educator is well established in the teaching and learning of students within a practice setting .The role can at times be a complex one which requires a variety of skills and knowledge in a profession that is constantly changing (Field, Jasper and Little 2014). Practice educators can often find themselves supporting students through a process of change; this may be through assisting students to develop a professional identify and may also mean enabling them to explore any views they have that potentially discriminate against any service user group or any assumptions they may hold.

Related to this, practice educators may also find they need to support students with any internal conflicts they may encounter when balancing their personal values with those of both the organization and the profession they are choosing to enter. Practice educators can find themselves supporting students to change their behaviour as a result of this learning. This can lead to a deeper understanding that can result in a change in views and the development of new skills. As will be seen in this article, adhering to the principles of MI and utilizing some of the tools and techniques that are part of this style can assist practice educators to offer effective supervision to students, particularly those who may be struggling within the placement setting.

In order to support students with any behavioural change that is necessary, it may be helpful to begin by considering the influences that enable people to change if they choose to do so. Miller and Rollnick (2002) suggest that there are a number of ways in which individuals have the ability to change without formal intervention, e.g. many people give up smoking without visiting their GP, or manage to lose weight without joining a slimming class. However, for some people, support may be required and a brief intervention may be helpful in this process and the use of approaches that are strengths-based, such as solution focused brief therapy (de Shazer et el 2007, Selekman 2008) and Signs of Safety (Turnell 2009) are increasingly being used within both social and health care settings, nationally and internationally, to achieve this.

Change can also occur when people believe it is possible that they can heal themselves. An NHS study found that people who were prescribed sleeping tablets fell asleep just 12 minutes earlier than those who has been prescribed a placebo and slept for only 11 minutes longer throughout the night (The Observer 2012). A further influencing factor in the change process is the relationship that is formed between the practitioner and the service user. Within the MI context, this relationship adheres to the Rogerian principles of displaying empathy, respect and genuineness in interactions with users of services (Rogers 1951). Therefore it may be helpful for practice educators to consider the above factors when encountering students who are embarking on any kind of change.

As mentioned earlier, MI is not just a set of tools and techniques; practising within the spirit of MI is essential and this requires developing a relationship which offers acceptance, compassion, empathy and a collaboration that seeks to identify the strengths that are inherent within the person. There are a number of principles that can assist this relationship and therefore precipitate behavioural change. Firstly, the need to express *empathy* is necessary. Empathy in this context is not about collusion, but through the use of reflective listening, the practice educator is able to demonstrate understanding without apportioning judgment or blame (Miller and Rollnick 2002). There is a clear power imbalance between the practice educator and student and often students can find it difficult to admit they are struggling for a number of reasons, including fear of not being seen to be competent. Expressing empathy can assist the practice educator to develop a relationship based on trust and one where students do not feel blamed for their mistakes, but are instead assisted to view these as part of the learning process.

The second principle of MI is the development of *discrepancy*; that is, supporting people to move from where they are currently to where they wish to be in the future. When an individual behaves in a way that is not congruent with their thoughts or opinions, they experience a conflict which feels uncomfortable and in order to reduce this discomfort a person will often change their behaviour (Festinger 1957). Through adopting the spirit of MI and applying the various skills and techniques, practice educators can support students to change if necessary. A lack of confidence is often a key issue for students which prevents them moving from where they are (as a student) to where they wish to be (to achieve their ambition to qualify as a practicing social worker). Using the communication skills that effectively enable this to occur can be a helpful aid for practice educators to assist students with this process.

Social work and health practitioners are used to encountering individuals who are resistant to change. MI offers an effective way to challenge this and avoid confrontation and argument during the process. Brehm and Brehm (1981) in Hohman (2012) suggest that psychological resistance can occur when individuals believe they are faced with limited or no choices and can become stubborn, hostile and/or resistance to change. Persuading an individual to do something they are reluctant to do can often make the behaviour worse. MI suggests that the type of communication between the practitioner and the service user is key to enabling change; it can either enhance resistance or act as a motivator for change. Lefevre (2005) interviewed social work students who stated that they often feel disempowered within the supervision process and they lack the confidence which would allow them to embrace new learning experiences, thus they become resistant. Adopting the skills of MI to *‘roll with resistance’* (Gordon 1970), the third principle of MI is an effective tool that practice educators can use to assist them in working with the student to overcome these barriers. By actively involving students to find answers and solutions to difficulties they may be experiencing can help them to reduce their anxieties and defensiveness and enable them to build their confidence. The modelling by practice educators of effective communication skills that avoid confrontation also offers valuable learning through observation for students who are then able to transfer what they have seen modelled to them in their supervision to their own practice.

Finally, supporting *self-efficacy* in individuals is a key principle of MI. Self-efficacy is the belief that a person is able to achieve a certain behaviour or desired outcome (Bandura 1977) and individuals are therefore able to influence their own destiny. It is important that practice educators demonstrate that they have confidence and belief in their students: they know that they can develop and change their behaviour if this is what they wish to do. The facilitation of self-belief by the practice educator, together with the nurturing of a sense of personal responsibility and autonomy, can create conditions for change. Eliciting self-motivating statements from students such as ‘I can do this visit’ and ‘I will get the information I need for this report’, can help to build student confidence, particularly for those who are anxious. This links to the use of narrative practice in practice education (Gibson 2012), and techniques commonly used in Neuro-Linguistic Programming such as the Meta Model (Bandler and Grinder 1975 in Grimley 2013), which are based on the theory that we are more likely to believe what we hear ourselves say. Therefore, if practice educators are able to elicit statements from students which positively state they are able successfully to undertake the tasks required, then it is likely that students will achieve their goals. Both formal and informal supervision offers ideal opportunities for practice educators to elicit such statements.

The key skills in motivational interviewing automatically adhere to the principles of this intervention. These will be familiar to many social workers as they are commonly used in various forms of counselling, but it is the combination of these skills used together which comprise MI and facilitates the self-belief discussed above that can lead to behavioural change. A common acronym for the combination of these communication skills is OARS – open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections and summaries (Miller and Rollnick 2013).

The power of using *open-ended questions* will be well known to many practice educators because they would have applied them to their own social work practice. They can be a useful tool when used in supervision to gain information regarding a student’s knowledge, skills, attitudes and values and they can also be a useful way (in conjunction with other tools) of gathering the necessary information required to assess the student.

People are more likely to change if they feel good about themselves (Miller and Rollnick 2002). In order to accept a single criticism about ourselves, we need to hear at least five positives (Trotter 1999 in Fuller and Taylor 2008) and for people who have attachment needs, far more positive statements need to be given (Howe 1995). In order to develop student confidence and self-belief, particularly for students who are anxious or struggling, providing *affirmative* statements can be very effective. Within the early stages of the practice educator and student relationship, the use of very simple statements such as thanking the student for being on time for supervision despite having a busy schedule can be helpful. As the relationship progresses, deeper affirmative feedback e.g. ‘You managed that difficult situation very effectively when you did ….’ can be used to highlight the student’s strengths and successes. Giving affirmative statements can help to build rapport and modelling the use of affirmation by practice educators can provide valuable learning for students who are again able to observe and transfer this into their own social work practice.

As with the use of open-ended questions, *reflective listening* is a key communication skill. Miller and Rollnick (1991) suggest that ‘reflective listening is a way of checking rather than assuming that you know what is meant’ (p75). There are a number of different types of reflections which range from providing a direct repetition of the statement through to double-sided reflections that can help avoid conflict. The use of the former by practice educators can help the student to feel acknowledged and validated, whilst the latter can assist the practice educator to highlight inconsistencies between the student’s goals and their current behaviour, without being confrontational. This is referred to within MI as ‘developing discrepancy’ and is sometimes referred to as the ‘Colombo approach’ (Kanfer and Schefft 1988) named after the TV detective. Columbo often presented as a confused man who asked many questions and having made assumptions about his demeanour, suspects often gave him information about their part in the crime. When adopting this approach, the practice educator needs to seek clarification in a similar manner and encourage the student to take a lead in explaining any discrepancies in what they have said or in their behaviour. For example, the practice educator may say to the student, ‘I am getting confused. You are saying that you are struggling with completing your portfolio because you believe that you are not good at academic work, and yet the work summary you wrote is good and the case presentation I observed you do at university has lots of theory in it, so how can this be the case?’ This technique helps to build confidence in the student, assists them to transfer learning from one situation to another and promotes self awareness. It also prevents the practice educator from falling into the expert trap (Miller and Rollnick 2013) and requires the student to find their own solutions to difficulties.

The use of reflective listening in the form of positive re-framing, offers a different perspective on any negative statements that are communicated by the student. For example, a student may say, ‘I am really worried about my next home visit; it didn’t go very well last time’. The practice educator could reflect back, ‘you have clearly been thinking about your last visit and the reasons why it didn’t go as well as you had planned; what are you going to do differently the next time you visit?’ Re-phrasing statements made by students in a more positive way can often help to reinforce their self-motivation.

Practice educators will also be aware of the importance of non-verbal communication. According to Mehrabian (1972), approximately 92% of communication is non-verbal, if we include the pitch and tone of our voice. Observing the body posture, facial expressions and eye contact of students can be helpful to enable practice educators to also listen to what students are not saying to them.

Finally, the use of summaries can be a useful tool in supervision if practice educators find they are getting ‘stuck’ with students and need to move the session along. It can also be used to link previous discussions together (Miller and Rollnick 2013), which can assist students to make connections between theory and practice. It also enables practice educators to check they understand what the student is telling them.

In addition to the OARS process outlined above, the use of scaling, which is commonly used in solution-focused brief therapy (De Shazer et al 2007), can also be a helpful tool in the supervision process in a number of ways. For example, it can be used by practice educators to gain immediate feedback on their own performance by asking, ‘On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not very helpful and 10 being very helpful, how helpful was today’s session?” They can then explore this further. It can also be used to assess the understanding and confidence of students, e.g. ‘On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 not being very confident and 10 being very confident, how confident are you that you can apply what we have spoken about today to your next home visit?’ Again this can be pursued further if necessary.

An example of where the author has adopted the philosophy of MI with a social work student and applied some of the tools and techniques which are part of the approach can be seen in the following example.

The author was acting as practice educator to a student who was anxious and lacked confidence in her abilities. In preparation for the direct observation, it was acknowledged that observations can evoke feelings of anxiety for students who feel under pressure to display the knowledge and skills they have been developing to the best of their ability (empathy). Prior to the observation taking place, the student identified the skills the observation would demonstrate (partnership working). Following the observation, which had not gone according to plan and which had highlighted a number of learning needs, the student was upset and this was acknowledged (empathy). In supervision, the student was encouraged to discuss what worked well and what was less successful through the use of open-ended questions (self-efficacy). Affirmation was demonstrated by acknowledging the strengths observed, e.g. ‘ I thought you introduced yourself, your role and the purpose of the session well’, and ‘the service user commented that they felt you listened to them and felt confident that you would help them: tell me how you did that’, (open-question).

The student was very negative at one stage describing her practice as ‘rubbish’. This was re-framed as follows, ‘there were aspects of the session that you can reflect on and consider what you would do differently next time’. This demonstrated the belief that the student could change in the future and would help to build confidence and self-belief. The student was then asked the following scaling questions, ‘On a scale of 1 -10, with 1 not being confident and 10 being extremely confident, how confident are you that your next direct observation will fully reflect your capabilities?’ The student scored herself a 6 and was then asked, the following questions, ‘wow, that’s more than half-way, what makes that a 6 for you?’, and ‘What would you need to do to make it a 7?’ This helps to elicit self-motivating statements.

The above skills are in essence the application of good listening skills. There can be times in supervision when a practice educator finds themselves in a session where communication does not appear to be going smoothly and in this situation it may be helpful to consider if the practice educator has inadvertently stumbled into any of what Thomas Gordon (1970) refers to as ‘roadblocks’. He suggests that in conversations a number of responses are often used, but these are effectively blocks to good listening. It may be helpful for practice educators to reflect on whether they are unintentionally using any of the following in supervision where they are finding communication with the student(s) difficult:

* Ordering, directing or commanding
* Warning or threatening
* Persuading with logic, arguing or lecturing
* Moralising, preaching,
* Disagreeing, judging, criticising or blaming
* Shaming, ridiculing or labelling
* Withdrawing, distracting, humouring or changing the subject

Gordon suggests that using any of the above implies an unequal connection. When applied to the practice educator and student relationship, using any of the ‘roadblocks’ can reinforce the existing power differential between the roles and can lead to the practice educator falling into the ‘expert trap’ (Miller and Rollnick 2013) and the traditional roles of student and teacher being adopted that can hinder effective student learning. When describing the effective use of MI, Miller and Rollnick (2003, p23.) use the analogy of practitioners ‘dancing not wrestling’ when they are communicating with people they are working with, and this same analogy can be applied to the practice educator and student relationship, particularly if the former is supervising struggling students and/or those who lack confidence in their abilities.

Although many of the principles of MI are similar to those of person-centred Rogerian counselling (Rogers 1951) a criticism of MI is that it is intentionally directive and the subtle re-framing that takes place can be seen as manipulative. However, Miller and Rollnick in the latest edition of their book in 2013 have contested this view, arguing that, if the spirit of MI is adhered to, then manipulation is prevented as any change that takes place is decided and acted upon by the service user.

Building on their earlier work, Miller and Rollnick go on to describe four processes in motivational interviewing (2013). These processes begin with the practitioner and service user establishing a working relationship; this is the ‘engaging’ stage. The next stage in the process, ‘focusing’, involves the service user, with support from the practitioner, developing a particular goal. The third stage, ‘evoking’ is where the practitioner elicits from the individual the reasons why they feel they need to change. This differs from the expert approach cited above which involves the practitioner providing a solution to the problem with little or no input from the service user. Finally, in what Miller and Rollnick refer to as the ‘flow’ (2013) of MI, plans are made by the service user to enable the change they have identified.

Miller and Rollnick suggest that there will inevitably be overlaps between these four processes and there will be movement back and forth between them. Practice educators will be aware from their social work practice of the importance of establishing a rapport with their service users and agreeing mutual goals as part of any planned intervention. However, the evoking stage is helpful in enabling service users and students both to move from where they are to where they wish to be; it is a change facilitator. The practice educator has to move away from taking a more didactic role which links to relationship- based practice. This approach has seen a resurgence in social work literature and social work practice in recent years (Ruch et el 2010,Watson 2011).

The role of the practice educator is a complex one. It contains many facets and is often undertaken by social workers and health professionals in addition to their case work. The more resources a busy practitioner has at their fingertips, the easier it is to manage the many demands placed upon them. Clearly a supervision session is not a counselling situation, but as in social work practice, practitioners often find themselves using counselling skills with a student. Research conducted by Lefevre (2005) with social work students, suggested that learning is enhanced when students feel listened to and respected by practice educators. Adopting the spirit of MI, together with the use of its many tools and techniques many of which are borrowed from person-centred counselling, can be beneficial to practice educators both in their role with students and in their wider practice.

Although there is an established evidence base for the use of MI within health and social care settings as outlined at the beginning of this article, there is little if any evidence for its use within practice education and this is an area that would benefit from further exploration.

4494 (including abstract).

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