

Do we need specific disaster management education for social work?

Professor Lesley Cooper, University of Wollongong, and Associate Professor Lynne Briggs, Griffith University, examine the activities of social workers in disasters and discuss the gaps in education and training. 

ABSTRACT

Social workers play important roles in disaster rescue, recovery and preparation for future disasters. However, their professional education has few elements that prepare them for specific disaster management roles and activities. This paper provides a review of the activities of social workers in disasters in the Asia Pacific, identifies specific training needs, and notes gaps in education and training. Based on this, curriculum initiatives are proposed that go beyond formal education based on concepts and principles of disaster management to include simulations and practice scenarios reflecting the complexities associated with disaster management in the health, community and human services areas.

Introduction

This paper discusses the tasks and activities of social workers during all phases of disasters using the authors' practice experiences and professional literature. A module of disaster management based on the literature, existing curriculum arrangements, and experiential learning is proposed. Although social workers are actively involved in disasters, they are rarely identified as such. Little attention has been given to specialised professional education programs and training agencies to better prepare social workers who are called on to provide crisis services, specialised assessments in mental health, and assist with a variety of community building activities.

Social work values and expertise

Social work as a profession is committed to social justice, enhancement of the quality of life, and development of the full potential of the individual, group and community in society (IFSW 2012, O'Brien 2011). As part of their professional activities, social work activities include:

- working with individuals and communities to improve social circumstances
- acting to reduce societal inequities while recommending fairer distribution of resources
- advocating for marginal and disadvantaged groups
- engaging in social and community research, and
- analysing and challenging social policies (AASW 2012, p. 3).

Practitioners with this capacity to work in these diverse ways individually and collectively provide a valuable skillset to communities in crisis situations and complement the work of other professional groups.

It is estimated that 19 300 social workers are employed in Australia (2014) in agencies and fields of practice such as the Department of Human Services, Child and Family Welfare, health and mental health organisations, local government and the not-for-profit sector (AASW 2011, p. 5). This workforce is distributed across Australia and is known for its close connection to local communities, its capacity to respond to practical and mental health needs, and the short and long-term operational activities of human service delivery. These professionals are a considerable resource that is essential to disaster management capabilities.

Contributions of social workers to disaster management

Social workers have historically contributed to disaster management in four major and overlapping areas of:

- working with individuals and families
- accessing resources
- managing complex interagency co-ordination, and
- working with communities (Zakour 1996).

This work has predominately taken place during the rescue and recovery phases although social workers are increasingly involved in risk mitigation and preparation for future events at the community level.

Literature about the involvement of social workers during disasters is not extensive, however social

workers involved in field activities have detailed their work following earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes and cyclones, fires and the SARS outbreaks. They describe work in the post-disaster phase as providing services that are immediately practical and crisis oriented. These practical aspects include access to food, shelter, clothing, providing counselling and advice for people manning help lines and connecting individuals to resources such as financial assistance providers. Their roles include providing and co-ordinating support to families looking for missing relatives. During the response to earthquakes in Iran in 2003, social workers were directly involved in supporting individuals and families with grief counselling and working with those with PTSD. According to Javadian (2007) social workers linked people with resources and prevented physical and mental health problems and family breakdown, intervening in service delivery systems to advocate for change. Similarly social workers working after earthquakes in New Zealand and Wenchuan, China provided numerous social work activities and noted the hidden and informal work many women perform by providing low-key and low-cost initiatives such as providing tea and coffee for people queuing for fresh water (Maidment & Tudor 2013) with social workers following through with long-term advocacy and community development efforts. In the Wenchuan earthquake in China the non-government organisations (NGOs) performed similar activities, the largest involvement being with young children and adolescents. Social workers also visited and consoled families, provided psychological counselling, organised donation activities, and provided services for older people. NGOs also provided assistance in mediation of family disputes, emergency settlement, and investigating disaster information (Huang, Zhou & Wei 2012).

Resources may be scarce or unavailable following an emergency event. Obtaining and accessing needed resources is a key social work role requiring purposeful dialogue, co-operation, information sharing, and advocacy with emergency management, government organisations, international relief organisations and NGOs providing relief activities. It can mean finding support for individuals and families, providing grief counseling and post-disaster support, linking individuals with available resources (finance, emergency housing special programs), and with instigating prevention programs for those with health and mental health difficulties. Accessing and co-ordinating resources often means assisting with make-shift program delivery arrangements. For example, in Christchurch, New Zealand, the head office of Presbyterian Support, a major agency, was red zoned. This meant staff, clients and other agencies were unable to access its services. At-risk mothers, babies and older people were particularly vulnerable (Milner 2013). Other local agency buildings remained intact and offered short-term temporary accommodation to allow services to operate. Social workers also used their homes as offices and offered extensive use of personal mobile phones to communicate with clients.

Helping individuals affected by emergency events is undertaken in complex organisational systems. This

complexity is illustrated by a description of practical help to Australian families caught in the Thai tsunami in 2004. Practical help was mediated through a whole-of-government approach including Australian government departments of Department of Human Services (Centrelink), the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian Federal Police, Emergency Management Australia, and the Australian Defence Force. Centrelink social workers, in their role as Family Liaison Officers, supported Australians by providing personal support to those affected and family members and worked with government agencies to provide assistance (Manning *et al.* 2007). Personal support included contact with Australian families caught up in the event and families arriving in Thailand to search for loved ones.

Many social workers are familiar with local communities and have long-standing relationships with diverse community groups. They understand the demography and characteristics of specific disadvantaged populations (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, migrants, public welfare recipients) and actively advocate for their specific needs. Social workers work with communities in the recovery phase, working directly with locals in discussing post disaster restoration and reconstruction of their community and participating in a range of planning activities (Kane & Smith 2013). These may include assisting community members to consult with other stakeholders regarding housing resettlement or creation of new economic opportunities, as well as participation in education programs regarding prevention (Goodman & Proudley 2008) and training officials in participatory techniques and ongoing community development.

Curriculum

Curriculum is generally regarded as a formal statement about course content. This statement includes course aims, objectives, learning outcomes and necessary assessment tasks to demonstrate what learning has taken place. Key aspects of curriculum include the values, knowledge, and skills that students are expected to acquire. Curriculum also refers to a designed set of planned learning activities where students actively engage with learning material in a way that encourages deep learning, critical thinking skills and the capacity to reflect on theory and practice. Good curriculum design involves both dimensions.

The Australian social work curriculum is a prescriptive statement, specified by the professional association (AASW 2012). Education for emergency management is not included. Nonetheless, much of the core content can be directly used when working in emergency response situations. What is missing is content developing an understanding of the interpersonal, interagency and legal complexities of working in disaster situations. Frontline work with apparently practical activities sounds simple but delivery of practical services, and provision of sensitive personal, social and psychological support in the face of logistical and practical challenges can be highly complex. These

barriers can include communication difficulties, priority public health concerns, language and cultural barriers, working with foreign nationals who do not share similar understandings of protocols and operations, and location challenges across different disaster sites. Challenging aspects of interpersonal practice include assisting in preparation of memorial services, supporting families looking for loved ones at the site of the disaster, and working with families conflicted over competing claims for personal belongings or remains. This is not a day-to-day experience. Family dynamics, complicated at the best of times, are frequently exacerbated at times of stress resulting in increases in family violence, particularly against women (Maidment & Tudor 2013). A complicating factor is that frontline social workers, health workers and emergency workers may also be impacted by the events and personally distressed themselves. Sensitive personal care and supervision of frontline workers is essential.

Content on disaster management could readily be mainstreamed and infused across the whole curriculum if there is agreement between academic staff about the relevance of knowledge and skills required for emergency management. When opportunities arise for curriculum revision, there are inevitably competing claims for new material. There are clear opportunities to provide learning about disasters as part of modules, in electives or specialised post-graduate courses. Alison Rowland (2013), a champion for the inclusion of disaster management in the curriculum outlined a module on disaster recovery management taught at the National University of Singapore. Human rights and strengths-based approaches guided the case-based approach. Other topics could include community development and associated strategies to assist with prevention and mitigation of risk. In the USA, Healy (2007) proposed inclusion of disaster management in the study of international social work. This proposal assumes that disasters happen 'out there' or 'over there' and 'not in my backyard' or 'at home'. Recent experiences of New Zealand social workers demonstrate how far from reality this might be.

In professional education programs theory is frequently separated from practice being regarded as more important than development of practice knowledge and skills. Missing from academic discussion on disaster education is the best way for students to understand relevant theories in the context of practice realities and complexities of disaster management. To ensure effective learning in disaster management, students need to engage in active and experiential learning activities where they are challenged to deal with the intricacies of real life situations. In this way they develop an appreciation of, and learn to deal with, the uncertainties, barriers and moral problems that exist and can better respond to situations where there may not be a 'best way' to proceed.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning is a powerful pedagogy. It offers opportunities for students to practice, use knowledge and skills, make decisions, work with others and experience strong emotions (Hofstede, de Caluwe & Peters 2010). Experiential learning is both an educational philosophy and method. Dewey (1933) was the first to advocate experience as central to learning. He was critical of educational approaches where the focus was teacher-centred and there was an emphasis on knowledge to the exclusion of experience. Other theorists followed Dewey including David Kolb (1984) who developed a learning model that included concrete experience, reflection, development of abstract concepts and their application to new situations. Reflection is central to experiential learning and approaches to reflective learning are critical for instructors and learners. As an Australian approach, Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) outlined their model of reflection in learning that starts with experience (behaviours, attitudes, ideas and emotions), moves to reflective processes and then returns to outcomes that include new ideas, behaviours, attitudes and feelings about the experiences. At the practice level, experiential learning means students learn by doing through a process of personal discovery about themselves and the motivations and behaviours of others. Making mistakes is part of the process. Experiential learning arouses many different emotions and attitudes with many feelings not being anticipated by the learner, other learners or facilitators. Along with these emotions, learners develop insight into their emotional responses and use this awareness in future situations.

Learning the intricacies and difficulties of emergency situations requires involving learners in experiential learning and exposing them to the realities involved in emergency management, the need for decision-making in the field often under extreme situations, hierarchical 'command-and-control' approaches and the practice complexities and ethical dilemmas that inevitability arise. Examples of experiential learning include such things as service learning, where students are placed with organisations for a short period of time to learn about the services and operational features of that agency, and internships and placements with emergency services organisations and various relief organisations such as Red Cross and other international relief organisations. Some social work academics in the US have taken students on field trips to disaster zones such as *Hurricane Katrina* in New Orleans where students participated in the recovery process.

Simulations

This paper proposes the use of experiential exercises to complement formal courses, e.g. role-plays and simulations where learners are assigned roles of people involved in disaster management. Their briefing includes character outlines and specific individual and team goals. Simulations have been used extensively in



Image: Lesley Cooper

Social workers provide services that are immediately supportive and practical for members of local communities.

disaster training focusing on a hypothetical scenario with participants playing roles that match their work responsibilities. The proposed role-play, by assigning roles outside work responsibility parameters allows students to understand the knowledge, skills and expectation of personnel in a variety of professional roles, and the complexity of decision-making faced by emergency management and social workers in disaster situations. Learning takes place in the act of doing, discussion, problem solving and reflection on practice. Emergency management scenarios differ as their focus is on the efficiency of policy and procedures, reactions to them and learning from enacting them.

These simulations could focus on a particular event and time such as the rescue or recovery phase, the management of an agency where infrastructure has been destroyed and client and personnel records missing and not recoverable. In health and human service organisations, privacy of personal information about clients and patients looms large. It is not possible in such extreme situations to share information about clients but interagency sharing of information may resolve difficult situations fairly quickly. Numerous real examples from the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 could be used as the basis of teaching simulations. These include:

- management of services and core activities when the service cannot be accessed (Milner 2013)
- supporting frontline human service workers under stress (van Heugten 2013)
- analysing the challenges of community recovery for the homeless, indigenous and marginalised people (Kane & Smith 2013)

- understanding the struggles associated with the terminology of victim survivor, homeless and simultaneously being a volunteer helper to others who may be more fortunate (Briggs & Roark 2013), and
- evacuation of end stage renal patients for treatment in safer locations (Stewardson & Crump 2013).

Throughout these simulations and similar table-top exercises, characters can be given messages about the situation and asked to respond. These messages can include requests from the media, information on serious breakdown of communication and goodwill between agencies, finding clients who are at risk of abuse, neglect or self harm, and the need to establish a program to provide social and psychological help for disaster management personnel. Additional tasks can be added depending on the situation. These experiential exercises differ from drills and simulations where people provide leadership and practice responses to their policy and procedures for the management of disaster under different situations. Understanding policy, procedures and routines is important, but thinking about and responding to complexity is essential. Being able to appreciate the stress of working cohesively and effectively in emergency situations is of prime importance.

There are some key ideas to consider when planning experiential learning including seeking support and advice of experts in disaster management in planning simulations and attending workshops run by disaster management organisations. These experts have practical knowledge, wisdom and experience invaluable in thinking about learning. The social work professional commitment is to seek the views and experiences of service users, survivors and volunteers.

These groups can also assist with thinking about the scenarios, design of learning, and the challenges for all participants.

It is important that consideration be given to a disaster management curriculum for social work and for all professions engaged in this area. A starting point may be to consider what sort of professional characteristics are required for those working in the field; the knowledge, skills and values needed for practice in this area; the competencies and capabilities necessary for all practitioners; the various educational activities and tasks to engage learners in a challenging area; the profession specific activities and the more general disaster management responsibilities. Most importantly there is a need for a comprehensive approach where theory is learned in practice not separately from it.

Conclusion

Disaster management is a neglected area in social work education. This could be remedied by the inclusion of electives in undergraduate and graduate programs. Simulations have been proposed as a pedagogical approach, which enables practitioners to develop skills in managing the complex reality of disaster management.

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