



The law and social work in Scotland

Risks in social work

Nick Balneaves:

You join me today in Glasgow where I've come to meet Bridget Rothwell. For a number of years Bridget worked as social worker with the child protection team for Glasgow City Council, today though she's a learning and development consultation at Barnardo's where she trains and supports their staff. And it's in that capacity that I come to talk to her today.

Nick Balneaves:

We're here to talk about the risks, Bridget, that social workers may come across in the course of their work. But do you think people coming into the profession actually appreciate that it can be a risky job?

Bridget Rothwell:

No, I don't. I think they probably come in for all sorts of un-thought-through and unexplored, and sometimes unknown reasons which are to do with looking after other people. And I don't think they think about necessarily how difficult that is and how much the issue of their authority is going to make or break how they do their practice.

Nick Balneaves:

What kind of risks are involved in the work?

Bridget Rothwell:

When you are in a situation where you're potentially going to remove a child from its home, you can't expect parents to act rationally or to be able to actually to predict how they will react. So you are constantly calculating the risk for them, but the risk for yourself in making the wrong decision. And for yourself the risk is you leave a child in a situation having misunderstood how dangerous it is.

Nick Balneaves:

What about more concrete risks to yourself?

Bridget Rothwell:

The risks are that you will, at it's most basic, that you'll be assaulted by a client. That you will find yourself locked in a room with a client who is behaving irrationally, that you will be spotted when off duty by a client who feels that you've done them wrong. Aye, I think there are, there are, there are physical safety issues that most social workers don't take very seriously.

Nick Balneaves:

Do you have any personal experience of that?

Bridget Rothwell:

Yes. I had an experience as a senior social worker when I was working in Glasgow of arriving home to find a client of ours sitting in the park right opposite where my house was, and this was a very dangerous man. He was a man who was well known to have mental health issues, whose child we had just removed from his care. And that was really scary, and I didn't know if it was actually just a coincidence that he was sitting outside my house. Because at that stage I was just about to move teams on the basis that my home was too close to my work. But the result of that was that I was put on a high alert risk in terms of a response from the local police station.

Nick Balneaves:

How did that make you feel?

Bridget Rothwell:

Terrified. And I think not just terrified for myself, but realising that actually there were implications for my children in the job that I did and implications for where you live, implications for how you live your life really, you know, which shops you shop in, who you speak to, how you spend your free time.

Nick Balneaves:

Apart from those sharp end risks that people face, are there any less obvious risks?

Bridget Rothwell:

I think there are long term risks built in to how people draw a boundary round their job in terms of the impact on them of taking work home, people will often couch that in terms of I need to get a report done, but what's more insidious is the person who goes home and can't sleep for worrying, that they have failed to take an action that might protect a child or we've left an old person in a situation that they may not survive. And I think those long term impacts on employee's family life, on their capacity really to go away and refresh so you find social workers building up huge amounts of time off in lieu; huge amounts of un-taken annual leave. They kind of repeatedly don't use the mechanisms that are in place to give them a break because they don't feel they actually have permission to because nobody will pick up their job when they're not there. And the evidence of that will be that the sickness rates, the absence rates, that you find in busy social work teams, which then has an impact on, on other parts of the team.

Nick Balneaves:

What are the risks if that isn't effectively managed? What are the risks to the way that people do their jobs?

Bridget Rothwell:

I think there are two main dangers. One is that people lose touch with their own emotional state, because in order to defend themselves from the overwhelming lack of success if you like, or failure to cope with the demands of the job, they will become procedure driven, they will stop seeing the dangers that children are in because everything will become led by a procedural response rather than a kind of proper engagement of the situation you've got on your hands. Or people will lose the boundary altogether and will practically be living with their clients by the end, you know, they're taking their children to school; they're making sure they've had breakfast before they go; we're worrying about whether the children will be picked up, and there's a kind of over-involvement which actually is not, is not functional, it doesn't help the family to change what's going on and overwhelms the worker even further.

Nick Balneaves:

Those stresses in the job must in some way be inevitable also. How can they be effectively managed?

Bridget Rothwell:

They can be effectively managed through supervision. I can become a bore on supervision. I think the manager's job is to help social workers understand what's theirs, what belong to the client and what can reasonably be expected in the interaction between the social worker and the service user. You'll hear managers say things like: 'I wish they would just get on with their job, so that we can all get on with our job, and having to say to them: 'actually they are your job.' Those social workers are your job. Maintaining their capacity to do their work is your job and you maintain their capacity by ensuring that they have proper reflection time, contact with human beings who are also doing the same difficult job and being able to articulate the impossibilities of it instead of hiding from them. And again, I would say that what matters is a decent supervisory structure and a good management regime that helps social workers to do their job.

Nick Balneaves:

And does there have to be formal mechanisms for that?

Bridget Rothwell:

I think so. I think so. I think if you leave it to chance or to good will, then it won't happen. I think they have to be formalised in workplaces. I think there has to be an expectation that people will attend supervision time and again. People, for good reasons, find their supervision cancelled, or are helped or allowed to avoid going to supervision themselves, and that I would say is a defence mechanism and needs to be picked up on.

Nick Balneaves:

How useful is the law in allowing staff to protect themselves?

Bridget Rothwell: I think in the same way that social workers don't always think about the law in relation to the work that they do, they very rarely also think about the law in relation to themselves and the protection of themselves. I think it has enabled social workers in lots of ways to do difficult face-to-face work with parents in particular when they're challenged on what right they have to carry out certain actions. So I think that has been really helpful. I think in relation to themselves, they don't really think about employment law, they don't really think about the ways in which the law should protect them as workers.

Nick Balneaves:

Are there any things that an employer has to consider in that regard?

Bridget Rothwell:

I think there are all sorts of rafts of things that employers have to consider before they should be sending social workers out to situations where they may be in danger. Such as, all sorts of health and safety issues; there are all sorts of issues around a duty of care and what our responsibilities towards our employees are, and I think good management systems and good supervision systems can help people maintain a balance on that. But you have often got some kind of tension between the rights of the worker to have some kind of safety built in and the circumstances you may be hearing a child being in. And I think we're often working on less information than we need in order to make a balanced judgement about that. And I think that's one of the challenges, as a manager of staff who are going out is to get that balance right.

Nick Balneaves:

Talk me through some of the good management systems that you mentioned there.

Bridget Rothwell:

You can do very simple things like, like have protocols that say more than one person should be going out on a first visit or gathering more information than we tend to before social workers are sent out, so that you know if we're alerted by the police that this person is known then we ask for a police escort. I think there have to be mechanisms put in place that allow social workers to control as much as they can of initial stages of a relationship with somebody.

And for me it's no different to blind dating in a sense, if you like, that you would, under most circumstances, you wouldn't agree to meet somebody who you didn't know in their own home, when you weren't sure what was gonna happen next. So I'm not sure why we do it as social workers really, that there ought to be fairly straight forward things we can do which are about actually bring them into the office and make an assessment of their interaction with you. You may get that assessment wrong, but at least you've had a chance to pick up the cues that this person may not be easy to work with or safe to work with under kind of more enclosed circumstances.

Nick Balneaves:

What practical difficulties can come in the way of making a risk assessment?

Bridget Rothwell:

I think time is the great enemy, and I think particularly in busy child protection teams, I think it's particularly acute there, not having time to process whose urgency you're responding to, what the reality of the child situation is, so we tend to be stuck in a kind of see/do pattern of response which is we take minimal information and we act on it, instead of saying 'right, okay, let's figure out whose anxiety this is'. Have we worked out what the source of the referral was, what the evidence is that goes with it, what the basis of it is; can we have some consideration to who else might be there when we arrive at the door, given what we know about this family.

Nick Balneaves:

What factors lead to the escalation of risk?

Bridget Rothwell:

Largely it's about communication. Largely it's about how all parties interact and communicate their messages really, and how they're understood, and there's very little you can do to repair the damage late in the day. But I think when we're talking about risk, we're talking about sharp end risk. It is about how clear we are with people about power that social workers possess, for me. It is about those situations where you go into a family and you say 'look, what we don't want here is for this child to be removed from your care, ultimately. But what you also need to know is that I have the power to tell your story to my superiors in a way that means that your children could be removed, and we need to be open about that and we need to be honest about that, and I need to talk to you about things that you can do that will help us not go that road and things that you can do that will, that will mean we do go down that road'. And I think it's about being comfortable with the powers that you have invested in you, and in order to do that you have to know that. And I think time and again what happens is social workers play a collusive game about what power they actually have and then hit a crunch point and have to become authoritarian. And I think that's often where the escalation comes in. That's not to blame the social worker. I think there are things that the system needs to get better at in terms of acknowledging the allocation of an impossible task, the ways that you can manage that impossible task and being a little bit more balanced about the power that social workers have.

Nick Balneaves:

Do you think there are differences in the risks faced between social workers in the voluntary sector and social workers in the statutory sector?

Bridget Rothwell:

I think they manage them differently. I don't think the risks themselves are different. I think there may have been a time when the risks were different, but I think there's been a huge change in the kind of work the voluntary organisations, large voluntary organisations like Barnardo's do over the last decade. Because it used to be possible for voluntary organisation staff to hide behind a notion that they had nothing to do, for instance with child protection. They can't do that any more. And that has meant that staff again have had to get comfortable with their role in protecting children as part of a larger system, And I think that has, that has, given people pause for thought.

Nick Balneaves:

How important is what you do, how important is training to help people understand the risks that they might face?

Bridget Rothwell: I think learning is important. I think you can't train people to understand risk if I'm honest. I think you can, you can offer them some skills for managing it but I think what actually matters is people's attitudes. And I think you learn by exploring your responses to things and I think if we can pull people back from having to... from being in constant situations where they're having to make decisions and ask them to dig a bit deeper, they will make fundamental changes to how they approach things, and that's where I think the role of learning and training comes in.

Nick Balneaves:

Bridget, thank you very much.

Bridget Rothwell:
You're welcome.