

THE ATTITUDES OF SOCIAL WORKERS
TOWARDS TROUBLED TEENAGERS

by

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To Donna, Myles and Ross for their support and
all those who encouraged me to complete this work

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	PAGE
Problem formulation	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Problem statement	1
1.3 The reason why agencies refer cases of troubled youths	4
1.3.1 Short term placements	4
1.3.2 Long term placements	4
1.3.3 Multiple systems	5
1.3.4 Low self-esteem	6
1.3.5 Authority figures	6
1.3.6 Hostility	6
1.3.7 Assessment	7
1.3.8 Discipline and containment	7
1.3.9 Educational, psychological and emotional needs	7
1.4 The nature and scope of social work intervention with troubled youths	8
1.5 Goal and objectives	11
1.6 Research question	11
1.7 The research design	12
1.8 Data processing	15
1.9 Respondents	16

	PAGE
1.10 Presentation of data	16
1.10.1 Transcript of data	16
1.10.2 Research report	17
1.11 Limitations	17

CHAPTER 2

Literature survey for the research topic:

The attitudes of social workers towards troubled teenagers

2.1 Introduction	20
2.2 Social work theories and their relation to adolescence	20
2.3 The multi-systemic model	23
2.4 Adolescence and social work perceptions	28
2.5 What is adolescence?	41
2.6 Social work services to adolescents	43
2.7 Social work attitudes	48
2.8 The stress of social work counselling	54
2.9 Focus group research	58
2.10 Conclusion	64

CHAPTER 3

Empirical data

3.1 Introduction	65
3.2 Data analysis	65

	PAGE
3.2.1 What does adolescence mean?	66
3.2.2. Where do my ideas about adolescence come from? Does my family background influence my work with teenagers?	67
3.2.3 How do I feel about the adolescents I know?	68
3.2.4 How confident do I feel in my work with adolescence	68
3.2.5 Does the agency I worker for have set procedures that determine the nature of interventions with troubled youths?	69
3.2.6 Are the troubled teenager and family dealt with as individuals or as an inter-related system?	69
3.2.7 Is a team approach employed, involving regular consultation with a supervisor or colleagues?	70
3.2.8 Do I feel that I have a wide enough knowledge of the theory and techniques to provide effective counselling?	70
3.2.9 Are systemic family therapy techniques employed?	71
3.2.10 Are there sufficient resources for troubled teenagers in South Africa?	71
3.2.11 What preventative strategies do I employ before opening a Children's Court enquiry?	72
3.2.12 Do I have a feeling of having failed professionally if I open a Children's Court enquiry?	74
3.2.13 Do the institutions selected for the children meet their particular needs or are there simply no available options?	75

	PAGE
3.2.14 What feasible recommendations for changes to the services for troubled youths can be made?	75
3.3 Content analysis	77
3.4 The emerging themes	79
3.4.1 Identity issues and personal experience	79
3.4.2 Time	80
3.4.3 Relationships	80
3.4.4 Parents and foster parents	81
3.4.5 Responsibility	82
3.4.6 Schools and industrial schools	82
3.4.7 Cases reported to the minister of welfare	83
3.4.8 Risk	83
3.5 Conclusion	84

CHAPTER 4

Empirical data: Follow-up group

4.1 Introduction	86
4.2 Data analysis	86
4.3 Responses to the questions	87
4.3.1 How can we change and improve our services?	87

	PAGE
4.3.2 The suggestion has been made that we need to work with the whole family. Do we have the skills to do this, however?	88
4.3.3 It is evident that we are seeing more complicated family problems involving adolescents, which often include abuse of substances by the adolescent or by the parent(s). Do we feel qualified to deal with these?	88
4.3.4 Do we want to keep families together?	89
4.3.5 How can we become more involved in preventative strategies?	89
4.3.6 The National Council for Child and Family Welfare is investigating a pooled service in Gauteng. What is your view of a collective service? How do you see your own contribution to this?	90
4.4 Discussion of the emerging themes	91
4.4.1 Relationships	91
4.4.2 Parents	92
4.4.3 Responsibilities	92
4.4.4 Schools, industrial schools and children's homes	93
4.4.5 The office of the Minister of Welfare	94
4.4.6 Risks	95
4.5 Conclusion	95

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion and recommendations

	PAGE
5.1 Introduction	97
5.2 The research question	97
5.3 Literature review	98
5.4 The facilitation of social worker' reflections on their work with troubled youths	101
5.4.1 Knowledge, attitudes and personal experience with teenagers	102
5.4.2 Feelings about teenagers	103
5.4.3 The provision of services to teenagers	104
5.5 Recommendations made by the focus group members for the management of troubled youths	108
5.6 Recommendations with regard to the attitudes of social workers	110
5.6.1 Team work	110
5.6.2 Therapeutic programmes	110
5.6.3 In-service training for social workers	111
5.6.4 A support group for social workers	113
5.6.5 The coordination and monitoring of services	114
5.6.6 Contracting with the parents and youth	114
5.6.7 Involving the parents and youth in decision making	114
5.6.8 Dealing with problems experienced with residential facilities and schools	115
5.6.9 Setting out guidelines for procedures and ensuring children's rights are upheld	115

	PAGE
5.6.10 Encouraging the parents and youths to participate in support programmes	116
5.6.11 Setting minimum standards	116
5.7 Synopsis	117
5.8 End note	121
BIBLIOGRAPHY	124
APPENDIX I	128
APPENDIX II	130

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM FORMULATION

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter the researcher aims to draw attention to the services offered to troubled teenagers and their families by social workers in child and family welfare agencies. These services are explored through an examination of the attitudes of the social workers towards troubled teenagers.

The increase in teenage criminality, the proliferation of gang cultures, drug abuse, school drop-outs and teenage pregnancy is cause for concern. These are practical problems that require action from communities. In this regard social workers are the frontline professionals dealing with troubled youths. This chapter looks at the problems that are evident in interventions with troubled youths: the goals and objectives of the study are set out, the research question is defined, the research design is discussed and the presentation of the data and limitations of the study are explained.

1.2 Problem statement

The research question addressed in this study relates to the attitudes of social workers employed at child and family welfare agencies in Gauteng

towards troubled youths. The research was undertaken in 1999, with the purpose of encouraging social workers and their agencies to pay attention to this area of service that appears to be neglected or actively avoided. Social workers are motivated to examine their confidence, skills and attitudes in their work with teenagers, as an initial means of empowering them to develop professionally.

Social workers employed in child and family welfare agencies require a wide range of skills. Dealing with anti-social youths and their families demands specialised knowledge and skills. Information about the general attitudes of social workers in this particular field of service provides useful data which could be utilised for in-service training courses, effective supervision and the improvement of services to youths and their families coming into the welfare system for assistance.

South Africa has experienced a major paradigm shift in the last four years. The welfare and the legal systems have undergone significant transformation which had led most social workers in the field of child and family care to experience confusion and stress. In order to maintain their professional status and remain effective, social workers must examine

their personal, moral, social and political attitudes, as these have an impact on their services to troubled youths and their families.

Discussions with social workers at places of safety, residential facilities and industrial schools suggest that in most cases neither the youths who are admitted to these institutions nor their families have had the benefit of effective therapeutic counselling prior to the opening of a children's court enquiry. Consultations with social workers in the field indicate that they feel they are unable to deliver effective services to youths and their families because there is little co-operation and co-ordination between the various service providers.

Child and family welfare agencies are often overloaded with casework. In order to cope with the workload, the age of the children to whom services are provided is reduced from the age of 18 to the age of 12. The situation at present is that some agencies refer cases of teenage problems and uncontrollable youths to the Department of Welfare and Population Development. This department is often not easily accessible as the offices are, in most cases some distance away from the community. As a result, travelling to some of the centers, such as that in Germiston, is costly, time consuming and difficult as two or three taxi rides may be necessary.

1.3 The reasons why agencies refer cases of troubled youths

1.3.1 Short term placements

Places of safety provide emergency, temporary accommodation for troubled teenagers from the date on which the Form 4 (Section 14(4) of the Child Care Act No. 74 of 1983) is issued for the emergency removal of the teenager. The teenager remains in a place of safety in order for the social worker to make an assessment and undertake a full investigation of his or her personal circumstances, so that a comprehensive report can be submitted for the finalisation of the Children's Court enquiry. Places of safety are often full which places the social worker under pressure to protect the teenager who is exposed to difficult or life threatening circumstances.

1.3.2 Long term placements

Children's homes provide long term accommodation for children who do not have parents or who cannot live at home as they would be at risk of neglect or physical or emotional abuse. Each children's home has its own rules and criteria for admission which preclude many adolescents

For example, some children's homes will only accept children up to the age of fourteen, while others will not accept children with behaviour problems or will only accept children on the basis that they are able to return to their parents within a period of one year.

Industrial schools provide accommodation for children who have educational or behavioural problems. However, the facilities and environment in these institutions is frequently not ideal due to the lack of discipline, bullying by peers and the availability of illegal drugs.

Fostercare involves placing a child with a family in the community. This is often considered to be the best permanent placement option if a child cannot live with his or her own family. However fostercare is seldom recommended due to the behavioural and emotional problems associated with troubled youths, as well as the difficulty of imposing rules and discipline on a teenager who has often not had boundaries imposed on him or her in the past. These teenagers commonly have difficulty verbalising their feelings and express their frustrations through destructive behaviour.

1.3.3 Multiple systems

Work with adolescents requires consultation with parents, other relatives, teachers and the peer group. In some cases the parents are divorced and unresolved conflict between them results in blaming one another for their teenager's problems. The youth may also have set ideas that are an integral part of the problem situation. In order to assist youths the co-operation of the parents is required. The social worker's task is made difficult when the

parents cannot be located, have no apparent interest in the future of their child, or cannot reach agreement about what plan would be in the best interest of their child.

1.3.4 Low self-esteem

Troubled adolescents often have experiences of failure, conflict and unsupportive environments which result in the lowering of self-esteem. Low self-esteem is experienced by most troubled teenagers and assisting the youth to build a positive self-image is an essential part of any treatment programme for troubled youths.

1.3.5 Authority figures

Many adolescents have limited social skills on which they are able to draw in interactions with authority figures. They also have difficulty expressing their feelings of frustration and disappointment to adults.

1.3.6 Hostility

Some troubled adolescents are hostile and unwilling clients. They may have been referred to a welfare agency against their will and often do not have an understanding of the destructive nature of their behaviour.

1.3.7 Assessment

Psychological and educational assessment is often required to establish whether the needs of youths can be met in children's homes or in industrial schools. Institutions offering this service, such as the Transvaal Memorial Institute (TMI) have a waiting list and admission procedure which together result in lengthy delays or limited access. The school system previously provided this service, but due to budget cuts now has a limited capacity to carry out the relevant tests.

1.3.8 Discipline and containment

Most institutions have adopted an "open door" policy. If teenagers repeatedly disobey the rules, or abscond, they are asked to leave and the supervising social worker has the responsibility of making alternative arrangements for the youth.

1.3.9 Educational, psychological and emotional needs

Academic achievement and career prospects must be considered when placing a teenager. Some teenagers have educational, psychological or emotional difficulties with which they should have been assisted in primary school, however, the education and health systems do not have the resources or capacity to identify and treat these problems adequately.

1.4 **The nature and scope of social work intervention with troubled youths**

In view of the above problems, providing social work services to troubled youths presents a demanding challenge for the social worker. Therapeutic intervention requires an exploration of the youth's primary and secondary environments. Family meetings and visits to schools and homes are necessary. A great deal of commitment and time is required from the social worker in order to provide a professional service to troubled teenagers. This must be backed up by supervision and agency support to prevent social workers becoming exhausted

I would argue that a closer examination of the welfare services offered to teenagers and their families is long overdue. It would appear that the welfare community in South Africa is failing to provide a healthy, supportive climate for youths in general. This is evident from the levels of poor achievement at school (reflected in the low matriculation pass rates), the increasing numbers of pupils repeating classes and the numbers of pupils dropping out of school. Problems such as teenage pregnancy, delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and the gang culture plague many communities.

The numbers of Grade 8 to Grade 12 pupils repeating class for the third time in Gauteng government schools averaged 3.83% of the total number of high

school pupils in 1996. Learners who interrupted their schooling and reapplied for entrance in 1996 was 1.02% for Grade 11 and 1.09% for Grade 12 (1996 and 1997 annual schools surveys). An article in *The Star* (5 May 1999) entitled 'One in two school kids tries drugs' suggests: "Half of Gauteng's high school pupils are experimenting with drugs. Of those, about 10% are regular drug abusers. One in three – and, in the higher standards, as many as one in two – school going youngsters is experimenting with drugs".

The Report of the Committee of Inquiry in the Abuse of Drugs (1970) states that evidence given by teachers, parents, psychiatrists and other professionals confirms that drug abuse seriously impairs the performance of children at school. Other aspects of substance abuse that detrimentally affect youths are personality and social adjustment, outlook on life, and moral and ethical values. Nicholas (1994) found that these youths often join a group where accepted social norms are rejected and malpractices such as illegal drug use, abnormal and criminal behaviour are the done thing. Unwelcome pregnancies may also result from the abuse of drugs. Nicholas (1994) states that Sapire (1988) found, in a local hospital survey, that 75% of pregnancies were unintended and 20% of these were women under 19 years of age. Nicholas further states that the consequences of black high school pupils becoming pregnant are exacerbated by their generally impoverished

backgrounds and the limited options they have as teenage mothers and fathers. He argues that counselling centers must therefore regard the task of assisting clients who are exposed to the risk of unwanted pregnancy as particularly serious. Loening (1992) writes that the frequently unhappy consequences of pregnancy in adolescence range from 'early termination' (procured abortion), to abandonment of the baby, to neglect and maltreatment, recurrent infections and malnutrition, through to early death.

In consideration of the above, the caring profession and the formal welfare sector must consider whether they are providing an effective service to troubled youths. The Department of Welfare and Population Development launched a programme in 1998 entitled 'Project Go'. This programme is aimed at relieving the overloaded residential child care facilities in the country. This includes places of safety, children's homes, industrial schools and reform schools. The programme is directed at providing more comprehensive services in the community in order to avoid placing and keeping children, unnecessarily, in residential care. It was thus introduced to alleviate problems, particularly in the youth care system.

The non-profit organisations, (NPOs) must examine the nature and impact of their services and consider whether these can be judged to be selective. Their

state subsidies could be reduced or cancelled if they are not providing a comprehensive family care service, including services to troubled youths. A starting point for social workers could be to examine their professional competency in this field. In order to do so, they should look inwards at their attitudes and concerns, and from this, work towards providing effective services to youths and their families.

1.5. Goal and objectives

The goal of the proposed research project is to explore the attitudes of social workers towards troubled teenagers. Arising from this the following research objectives have been identified:

- * to conduct a literature review of social workers' attitudes towards troubled youth
- * to facilitate social workers' reflections on their work with troubled youths by means of two focus groups
- * to propose recommendations for the management of troubled youths.

1.6 Research question

The research is exploratory in nature, the question to be explored is:

'What is the attitude of social workers towards troubled teenagers?'

The data collected will be both qualitative and quantitative. The following terms will be explored and described in terms of the perceptions of the social workers who participated in the two focus groups.

The working definitions of the concepts to be explored are:

- * 'attitudes': "a way of regarding, considering and permanent, disposition or reaction (to a person or thing)"
- * 'troubled': "a 'difficulty' or distress, vexation, affliction....be disturbed
o or worried
- * 'teenager': "person in teens"
- * 'teens': "years of one's age from 13 to 19"

Pocket Oxford Dictionary (1985)

1.7 The research design

The research is exploratory done in a participatory mode where the respondents become the researchers of the problem using their own experiences as data (Collins 42:1999).

A focus group is used as the instrument of data collection. A focus group is particularly useful in exploratory research where little is known about the subject under review, and when the topic is related to non-specific concepts

that deal with feelings and attitudes (Steward & Shamdasani 1990:15). The information obtained often provides the basis for further research.

The facilitator/researcher, who has ten years' experience working with troubled youths, participates in the group discussion. The researcher's personal biases are:

- * Parents have a tendency to relinquish their responsibility for their troubled teenager after consulting the social worker.
- * Social workers are under pressure to remove youths and place them in institutions due to the lack of therapeutic and community support systems.
- * The system for placement of troubled youths does not benefit youths due to limited options.
- * Social workers intellectualise and rationalise their performance in terms of limited resources and the political climate.
- * Social workers have a sympathetic attitude towards troubled youths.

The researcher provides some structure by imposing a few group rules at the beginning of the session. However, the researcher takes care not to unduly influence the discussion by verbalising her biases and asks open ended questions, focussing on the work and attitudes of group members.

The group rules are as follows:

- * The participants are regarded as experts in the field of family care and the ideas of each person are valid and should be treated with respect.
- * The group discussion is limited to issues directly related to the research question. The group leader indicates when the members of the group digress from the main topic. Acceptable topics are those that are directly related to the members' work with troubled teenagers, with specific emphasis on the attitudes of the members. The focus group is not a forum for complaint or negative sentiment about welfare agencies. The aim of the focus group is to enable workers to explore their personal feelings about their work with troubled youths.
- * The group leader facilitates a discussion in the structure of a focus group. A focus group is a research technique whereby a facilitator meets with small groups to present a project or subject and solicits input from the participants (Denning and Verschelden 1993:578). The subject of the social workers' attitudes towards work with trouble teenagers is then put to the group for discussion.
- * A semi-structured group format is followed, in which the members are given some latitude to explore their own views pertaining to the research question.

Grinnell (1985:313) states that a semi-structured group format is usually conducted with respondents who share a common experience of knowledge. In this research the members of the focus group have between three and fifteen years' experience in working with troubled youths and their families.

Stewart & Shamdasani (1990:18) advise that once the research question has been clearly stated, precise questions must be drawn up in order to obtain the information required for the research. They warn the researcher that a focus group should not be allowed to become a directionless conversation among group members. Questions are circulated to the focus group members one week before the group is due to meet (see Appendix 1).

A follow-up focus group session is convened approximately four weeks after the initial session, when feedback on the data generated from the first session is discussed with the group members. Suggestions for improving social workers' attitudes towards their work with troubled youths and their families are recorded.

1.8 Data processing

The group members' responses to the questions and their discussion of topics is video-taped, enabling the researcher to undertake a detailed study of the dialogue at a later stage. The data is categorised according to the

questions. Similarities and dissimilarities are noted and the themes emerging from the questions are identified. In this way a content analysis is carried out.

1.9 Respondents

The focus group consists of six social workers invited to participate in the discussion. This is a purposive (purposefully selected) sample group. These social workers are based in the eastern region of Gauteng and carry similar responsibilities to those social workers in child and family welfare agencies in South Africa.

1.10 Presentation of data

The procedures following in the examination and presentation of the data are outlined below:

1.10.1. Transcript of data:

The group discussion is audio taped. The analytical technique employed for data obtained from a focus group is the transcription of the dialogue. A transcription of the group discussion will provide a written record that can be studied. Stewart & Shamdasana (1990:103) suggest that the researcher may feel a few small alterations or additions are necessary to give a true reflection of the discussion. However, care should be taken not to detract from the intended meanings implied by group members.

1.10.2 **Research report:**

A research report is presented to describe the attitudes of the group members towards their work with troubled youths. The information is derived from a content analysis of the two focus group sessions. A narrative description explains the data collected and this is supported by two tables. The number of responses, in terms of positive and negative, are set out in Table 2 and each response is categorized according to a theme in Table 1. This is followed by a summing up of the data and a conclusion which includes suggestions for the improvement of services to troubled youths. This report will be helpful for child and family welfare agencies and social workers working in the field of troubled and uncontrollable youths.

1.11 **Limitations**

Focus group research is an inductive process with certain limitations which are outlined here. Firstly, the ability to generalise beyond this focus group to a population of all social workers at child and family welfare agencies in South Africa is limited. One reason for this limitation is that the respondents in the group are influenced by the group interaction and by the opinions of others in the group. Secondly, a focus group only provides a limited opportunity for observation from which it is difficult to make generalizations with regards to other behaviour patterns of the group members and with regard to other agencies in South Africa. Thirdly, it is not

possible to make statistical estimations at this level of research as the information gathered is qualitative, based on the opinions of the focus group members, and the data analysis is influenced by the researcher's interpretations.

In spite of the limitations of this research regarding social workers' attitudes towards troubled youths, it is a starting point. This study should lead to an examination of the help given to troubled youths and their families. It should also provide a basis on which the services to these youths can be improved so that they have the opportunity to continue their education and lead productive and fulfilling lives.

This dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 illustrates the problem in terms of which a problem statement is formulated. The goals and objectives are set out and the research design is explained.

Chapter 2 is a literature study covering issues directly related to social workers' interactions with troubled youths and their families. There is also an examination of the stages of adolescence and focus group research.

Chapter 3 presents and explains the empirical data collected in the focus group. The themes which emerged during the discussion and the positive and negative responses are tabulated.

Chapter 4 presents the discussion of the follow-up focus group session in which the themes are discussed and further questions are put to the group members.

Chapter 5 comprises the conclusion. This presents a summary of the literature study and of the findings based on the focus group discussions. On the basis of these findings recommendations are made for the management of troubled youths. Recommendations are also suggested to improve the attitudes of social workers involved with troubled youths. A synopsis concludes the dissertation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE SURVEY FOR THE RESEARCH TOPIC:

THE ATTITUDES OF SOCIAL WORKERS TOWARD TROUBLED TEENAGERS

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out social work theories related to the field of troubled youths, with an emphasis on the social workers' perceptions and attitudes. There is also an examination of what adolescence is, the nature of social work services to adolescents and the potential stress involved in social work services to adolescents. An exploration of the nature of focus group research concludes the chapter.

2.2 Social work theories and their relation to adolescence

The task of rearing children is not an easy one and some families find it particularly difficult to cope with their teenage children. This phase of human development is characterised by changes and challenges. The help proffered by adults is not always accepted, even by those who appear to be coping, and it is even more difficult for those whose problems have been referred to social work agencies.

The social work professional is overloaded with information which requires integration and an understanding of a number of different disciplines. Social workers are required to specialise in specific fields. The child welfare field covers a wide range of services and its boundaries are difficult to define. Child welfare organisations are authorised to undertake statutory and counselling services, whilst also being required to carry out developmental social work services with marginalised communities. The main focus, however, is the protection of children and adolescents. This service is activated when the normal social systems (the family, churches and schools) are unable or unwilling to carry out this function (Zuckerman 1983:35-37).

The social science literature is aimed at the pursuit of knowledge and many psychological and sociological studies do not yield data that can be applied directly to field work. Three of the most utilised approaches are:

- * The 'diagnostic' theories which stress the need to understand the client's problems in terms of past experiences.
- * The 'non-directive' theories which attempt to move the clients towards a congruent self.
- * The 'functional school' which places the focus on the 'here and now' and

the dynamics of change currently operating

(Laycock 1970:5).

A fourth approach has emerged more recently based on a 'systemic' view of human interaction. This theory has an ecological approach focusing on all systems, orders of systems and interrelations among systems. Arising out of the systemic approach to therapy is the 'multi-systemic' approach, taking the broadest possible view of man in his environment. "It is a shift from an analytic and reductionistic epistemology" (Henggeler and Borduin 1990:12).

This view is appropriate in the present South African welfare system which has undergone a major paradigm shift. The White Paper for Welfare (1995) encourages the recognition of various systems - affecting human behaviour - more specifically the geographic, economic, cultural, educational, family and welfare contexts. Peterson (1995:471-472) stresses that contexts such as the physical world and social networks such as family, workplace, neighbourhood and school, all influence the individual. A 'holistic' view takes account of the influence of these systems on the individual.

In support of this approach Goldberg (1977:269) and McKendrick (1987:152-174) motivate for the utilisation of an integrative social work approach, both when dealing with adolescents and their families and for South African social work practice in general. Enhanced social functioning is the goal of social work intervention. Social functioning is the interaction between the individual and his or her environment. A perspective that stresses the interactive nature of human behaviour is the ecosystems approach, focusing on the reciprocal relationships existing between an individual and his or her context (McKendrick 1987:161).

The researcher favours the multi-systemic approach which takes account of the micro and macro influences in the youth's environment and draws the social worker's attention to the diverse, cultural, social and political influences on individuals, families and communities in South Africa.

2.3 The multi-systemic model

A multi-systemic model is a rejection of traditional psychological perspectives. This model is also referred to as the 'systemic', 'ecological' model or 'developmental contextualism'. An ecological or systemic perspective views

humans are inseparable from their environment. The social environment has a systemic nature where subsystems are interconnected via dynamic, reciprocal and circular mechanisms (Peterson 1995: 471-472).

The multi-systemic approach incorporates the following central principles of systems theory, as provided by Henggler and Borduin (1990:13-18):

- * Any system is an organised whole and elements within the system are necessarily interdependent.
- * Every system has an organisational pattern resulting in consistent and predictable relationships. The system cannot be understood by examining the individual elements. A living cell provides an example of how a system is interdependent.
- * Behaviour can only be understood by examining the interpersonal contexts in which it occurs.

The multi-dimensional and systemic nature of behaviour has major implications for conceptualising many different adolescent behaviour problems. The four systems impinging on adolescents are parent/child relations, peer relations, school performance and individual characteristics. The most significant

implication is for the therapist not to assume that one system is the most important for intervention, whilst ignoring the others (Henggeler and Borduin 1990:7).

Keeney (1983) argues that:

Patterns in a system are circular rather than linear...

Non-linear epistemology emphasises ecology, relationship and whole systems.

(Keeney 1983:14)

Interventions do not focus on a single event or behaviour, they extend to include a range of stresses and processes in the client's experiential world.

all families embody feedback processes that provide stability for the whole family.

(Keeney 1983:68)

The behavioural equilibrium in a system is dynamic. For example when a child transgresses a range of behaviours considered acceptable within a family, by displaying unacceptable behaviour such as stealing, corrective feedback is given in the form of a parental reprimand.

all change can be understood as the effort to maintain some constancy and all constancy is maintained through change

(Bateson 1972 in Keeney 1983:69)

Some changes are of a genetic, developmental nature and others occur in the environmental context. Change is inherent in open systems and is part of an evolutionary process.

Adolescence is a time of change and the ability to maintain an identity and meet the demands required is a challenge which places stress on the individual. An imbalance between one's cognitive self-structure and experience results in a state of disequilibrium which can be intolerable. "Through processes of assimilation and accommodation, the individual is continuously reaching new levels of equilibrium" (Henggeler and Borduin 1990:16).

The mind is an aggregate of interactive parts with feedback structure. The complexity of such systems ranges from simple feedback to what Bateson called an ecology of mind.

(Keeney 1983:90)

Bateson (1972 in Keeney 1983:91) explains that a complex entity such as the "mind" can be substituted with the word "system" to enable one to see that "mind" becomes a property not just of a single organism but of relations between the organism and its context, including systems consisting of man and man, or man and horse, man and his garden, or beetle and plant. The individual does not exist in the body only, but pathways of communication and messages outside the body also exist; these are subsystems which together have meaning.

All experience arises as a consequence of particular programmes, rules, plans, scripts, recipes, agenda, dramas sequences, relations, recursive systems, careers, structures, grammars, 'schticks' and so forth.

(Rabkin 1978 in Keeney 1983:20)

Interactions between social workers and their clients are governed by certain general rules in order to achieve the expectations of the participants in a therapeutic situation. Jackson (1990 in Henggeler and Borduin 1990:18) elaborates on this: "exchanges of information across boundaries are governed by rules, which are responsible for the organised pattern and sequences that are observed in interactions".

The therapist is part of the therapeutic system; as such, she must not only be aware of her client's feelings and behaviour, but also of her own. Social workers must consider their own attitudes in order to become more aware of their influence on clients. "Thus the social worker's epistemological exploration becomes the very subject of her own investigation" (Keeney 1983:22).

According to Henggeler and Borduin (1990:18), the multi-dimensional and systemic nature of behaviour has important implications for conceptualising many different child and adolescent behaviour problems. There is a reciprocal influence between the adolescent and the therapist. Peterson (1995:473) explains

the concept of "reciprocity", where there is interaction between complex environments. Within this context adolescents influence their environments and are in turn influenced by them.

Therapists make distinctions (observations), these observations may include the therapist him/herself. Social workers must therefore bear in mind the impact they have on their clients. Keeney (1983:32) argues that "the therapist becomes part of the distinctions and the distinctions she make of those distinctions. Thus we encounter a self-referent paradox underlying all observations". It is therefore important as a therapist, to note the nature of clients' responses and incorporate this knowledge into a therapeutic plan. Keeney (1983:32) warns that unless we examine where we are coming from as therapists we can easily repeat the very problems we seek to cure.

2.4 **Adolescence and social work perceptions**

The attitudes and perceptions of social workers in dealing with adolescents is a field of social science research on which little has been written. There are no local sources and few international sources of information which relate to this subject. Jones (1987) in *Like Distant Relatives* looks at adolescents' perceptions of social workers. In this study Jones refers to the literature of authors such as Crompton (1982) and others who have written books specifically

about the interface between adolescents and social workers. Some of these books were compiled in the early 1980's, however, and are therefore not necessarily relevant to today's adolescents.

How social workers perceive adolescents will influence the nature of the services they provide. The statements which have been made by mental health professionals about young people's views of social workers and social workers' views of adolescents must constantly be challenged, as these ideas might enter the 'folk wisdom' of social work and influence the social worker's attitude towards adolescents in a negative way (Jones 1987:1).

Crompton (1982:13) formulated some questions which social workers should ask themselves when preparing to work with adolescents:

- * What do I mean by adolescence?
- * Where do my ideas and attitudes come from?
- * What do I think about my own adolescence? What can I remember about it?
- * What evidence is there of a) events (photographs, other people's comments) b) feelings, memories (diaries)?

- * Does my 'present' affect my memories and interpretations of my adolescence?
- * How do I feel about the adolescents I know now personally or by repute (e.g. own off-spring, siblings, clients, friends' children, friends, attendees at some religious centre)?

Social workers who become aware of their feelings and attitudes with regard to these questions before they commence work with adolescents, will be able to acknowledge how their experiences influence their approach to their work.

Firstly social workers should be clear on what adolescence is. Jones (1987:7) provides a picture of adolescence and illustrates this with the following ideas:

violent rupture, re-fighting the battles of earlier years, loss of identity, obsession and pre-occupation with self, as a generation which has to find its way forward without the benefit of maps or guides from older generations, a time of crises and stress, when adults (especially parents) are having to be rejected and when there is turmoil in the adolescent's value structure.

(Jones 1987:7)

The idea of adolescence being a 'crisis stage' also arises out of the work of Erikson, Mays and Mead (in Jones 1987:7). They highlight the emotional experiences which adults remember from their adolescence. In addition, adolescence may be a time of crisis, not only for the youth, but also for adults, who may feel threatened by the challenging behaviour, attitudes and need for independence which accompanies adolescence. It is important to note that generally, professionals only have contact with adolescents in times of crisis (Jones 1987:8).

Crompton (1982:40) gives examples of feelings and problems that may negatively affect the positive relationship necessary for a social worker to work effectively with adolescents:

Discouragement: In order to establish a working relationship there must be a measure of liking and respect. It may arise that a negative attitude exists towards individuals who are representative of certain groups, for example, old people, prostitutes or adolescents. One cannot say that this is wrong, but the social worker should recognise these feelings as denial of them may result in overcompensation or rejection. Even if social workers do not dislike adolescents, they may not like working with them, due to feelings of inadequacy, impotency and being unable to change the accepted order of things. Hugman (in Compton

1982:40) suggests that “these feelings arise because the problems of adolescence may seem particularly intransigent and it is very easy to become discouraged when the task seems too great and the social worker sets herself too much to achieve”.

Inadequacy, guilt and shame: Brandon (in Crompton 1982:41) argues that “social workers may draw boundaries around themselves in a rigid, protective way that smells of fear”. The social worker may convince herself that she is working under great stress and odds, in the best interests of her client, but fail to see that the main obstacle in the client/therapist relationship are her own defenses against the adolescent. Jordan (in Crompton 1982:41) suggests in many cases it may be the worker’s ego rather than the client’s that may be under threat.

Material help: Practical help and money may be what is required. These may not always be available or practical, however, and the social worker may sidestep these issues and focus on emotions.

Behaving responsibly: Social workers are so often influenced by parents and teachers, and so fail to understand the adolescent. The social worker should

uphold the basic social work values of behaving responsibly and look at the situation objectively, in a balanced and professional manner.

The outside world: The courts, police, schools, press and the public expect much of social workers. In turn, social workers themselves have idealised ideas of their responsibilities and work.

Support and supervision: Social workers require regular supervision and support. However, the situation in most child and family care agencies is such that supervision is irregular and superficial.

The social worker's own life: The social worker's own experiences and her perceptions and attitudes of adolescence, may have a detrimental influence on her work with adolescents. Crompton (1982:47) reminds social workers to be particularly aware of unresolved problems from their own adolescence.

Authority and control: The social worker represents authority. An investigation of the adolescent's problem may result in the opening of a Children's Court enquiry. The social worker also represents the agency by whom she is employed.

These responsibilities may place the worker in a difficult position where she is compelled to set limits and exercise control, while at the same time respecting her client's freedom.

Referral to a residential institution or industrial school is sometimes regarded by the social worker as evidence of the failure of the helping process. The training social workers receive may not equip them for their role as agents of social control - "they may confuse control as authoritarianism and repression" (Howells, in Crompton 1982:51).

Labelling and laziness: Social workers often fail to give the client the benefit of a professional service because they do not have the time to assess and explore the client's problems. They accept, without question, theories and assumptions about adolescence without having an in depth knowledge of the individual adolescent and his or her problems. This problem is evidenced by social workers who glance briefly at the client's file and then make decisions without exploring other options with the client.

Fear and violence: Violence of a physical or verbal nature is sometimes used by adolescents for material gain or for psychological advancement. The social worker cannot ignore the impact of violence on herself and on others.

Confidentiality: Does the social worker have the right to pass confidential information from the adolescent client on to parents and teachers? Who has the right of access to files concerning the adolescent? A meeting place also poses a problem as home visits may not provide the privacy required whilst an office interview or interview at school may be too official.

Feeling foolish and rejected: This occurs when the client is uncooperative. The social worker may feel rejected by the client which could affect her confidence.

Anger: Anger is regarded by many mental health workers as unprofessional. However, the many frustrations faced by the social worker may promote anger. Anger which is recognised and channeled in the right direction is not necessary harmful.

Respecting and expressing concern: A social worker should be able to express respect and concern without being swallowed up by these emotions. Respect, affection and warmth require reciprocity and are a necessary component of a good working relationship. The social worker must be aware that over-involvement results in a lack of clarity, identity and self-knowledge.

Communication: Social workers may feel that they do not know how to communicate with adolescents.

Jones (1987:76) has undertaken some research on the attitudes of adolescents and social workers in the United Kingdom and proposes that the following variables will influence the perceptions of social workers:

- * the age and sex of the adolescent
- * whether the adolescent is delinquent (in trouble with the law)
- * whether the adolescent is in conflict with adults
- * the location in which the adolescent lives, i.e. urban or rural
- * the nature and length of previous contacts with welfare agencies
- * the characteristics of the caseworker

- * the characteristics of the intervention, e.g. group work, statutory or therapeutic counselling.

In his conclusion Jones (1987:185) states that the overall perceptions adolescents have of social workers is predominantly positive and favourable.

However much a social worker thinks she knows an adolescent, her observations and speculation will be of very little service unless the adolescent too has made observations and speculations about his or her social worker. Jones (1987:70) concludes that accurate and useful assessments can be made only if the assessed adolescent chooses to place enough trust in his assessors to reveal his/her true self.

In order to provide skilled social work services to adolescents, social workers must not only be aware of the general attitudes of adolescents towards them but must have some knowledge of how the individual adolescent regards the therapeutic situation. Adolescents generally find it difficult to approach social workers. The contact is usually the result of a referral made by a concerned parent or teacher.

Rees and Wallace (in Jones 1987:60) have noted how clients from all backgrounds seem generally orientated towards help that is concrete and supportive. Jones (1987:65-71) has looked at various studies, from which the following themes emerged:

Social workers are seen primarily as agents of social control. They are remote from or irrelevant to most aspects of the adolescent's life and in some cases are uncaring or disinterested. Some adolescents felt betrayed by a social worker who made custodial or punitive recommendations.

There are four types of young people social workers deal with, i.e. those who can cope; those who are simply disorganised; those who are temporarily disorganised; and those who are seriously disorganised.

Adolescents in the community tend to see social work supervision as a form of punishment. This idea may be the result of an association with probation officers, where the aim is to "keep him out of trouble and remind him that he is being watched" (Jones 1987:71)

However, in spite of some negativity, many adolescents and their families see the social worker as a 'friend' and as helpful. This may be because the social worker is less authoritarian than teachers or the police, more interested and caring, and seen as trying to help with difficulties.

The arrangements with regard to contacts will also influence the adolescent's view of the social worker. These can take the form of home visits or office interviews. Parents may be included or excluded. If the parents are excluded they may become resentful and wonder what progress is being made.

Group work with adolescents proves to be a useful method of social work intervention. It provides a context which promotes the improvement of social functioning: the socio/emotional needs of adolescents can be realised and tasks accomplished (Podbielski and O'Brien 1996:179). The importance and relevance of the peer group for adolescents makes group work a popular method for this age group (Euster, Ward, Varner and Euster, in Podbielski and O'Brien 1996:179-183).

The majority of adolescents placed in institutions are either assumed to have been in some kind of trouble or are regarded as being difficult to handle. As a result of

this view these children are sometimes stigmatised. The main concerns of adolescents is "getting out, keeping out of trouble, having fun and getting on with other boys and girls of their own age group" (Walter, in Jones 1987:72). Adolescents do not recognise the necessity to change their attitudes or behaviour readily and do not generally define their problems in emotional or interpersonal terms. Adolescents who have been in trouble accept "natural justice". Natural justice equates to the stage of moral development in which it is believed that one should "do one's duty, show respect for authority and uphold the social order for its own sake" (Kohlberg, in Gerdes, Ochse, Stander and Van Ede 1981:276).

It must be borne in mind that, although there are many creative ways to work with adolescents, they appreciate tangible, practical assistance in the context of a caring relationship and respond well to fun activities in a group context. It must be noted that 'talk' and 'treatment' have not been found to be central to many adolescent's understanding of the usefulness of social work services (Jones 1987:74). Jones (1987:59) argues that research has shown that social work interviews tend to lack structure and the style is predominantly reflective. Clients, however, are usually looking for advice, advocacy, material aid or other practical assistance.

2.5 What is adolescence?

Certain labels and attitudes associated with adolescence should be clarified as these are often the cause of the problems social workers experience in their dealings with these particular clients.

Firstly, adolescence is not inevitably stressful, nor are the problems associated with it necessarily different from those of other stages in life (Crompton 1982:19). Care must be taken not to generalise this stage as being characterised by rebellion, gloom and delinquency. Each adolescent is an individual each adolescent's situation, context and difficulties are unique. However, there are certain common challenges which adolescents must face, Crompton (1982:19-39) sets out some of these:

- * establishing independence
- * new responsibilities
- * physical change
- * accommodation
- * pressure at school
- * unemployment

- * glue, booze and drugs
- * sex.

Many adolescent problems centre around confusion relating to the following issues and feelings:

- * normality in relation to their peers
- * loneliness and love affectings feelings of acceptance at home and in the peer group
- * worthlessness, depression, guilt and stigma arising out of the adolescents' inability to cope at school and in social situations
- * respect and responsibility which the adolescent must earn.
- * control and authority through acceptance of the social order.
- * fun which is important for most adolescents

While terms such as 'the generation gap' suggest a major divide between adolescents and adults, Jones (1987:10) finds that research disputes this. There is no doubt that poor parental relationships can create major problems for the adolescent and may negatively affect other adult relationships in their present or

future. The social worker must be sensitive and aware of the nature of the relationships in the adolescent's life and consider how these effect their behaviour.

Adolescence is not necessarily a time of crisis, but those in contact with social workers are more likely to be experiencing difficulties. He suggests that younger adolescents are less likely to be critical and discriminating in their comments about social workers, and argues that girls make comments reflecting 'feeling', whilst boys focus on what happened, i.e. 'behaviour'.

2.6 Social work services to adolescents

How can we determine what good social worker practice is? Jones (1987:19-29) suggests we ask the following questions:

- * Is the practice acceptable to the client?
- * Does the practice achieve the desired results? Examples of these results could be an improvement of an emotional state or behaviour, or provision of care or advocacy for those unable to protect themselves.

To add to the above, it must be noted that the contemporary understanding of services to adolescents considered to be acceptable by adolescents, is regarded as interventions likely to achieve the required goals which are short-term and task-centered with a behavioural orientation. That is, focusing on an issue which is of immediate concern and applying strategies such as rehearsing actions, confronting issues and clarifying responses. The therapeutic climate in which these tasks are tackled must be supportive. Social workers should give attention to the dimensions of therapy outlined in the next paragraph.

The social worker's approach, the way in which she presents herself to her client and the relationship they establish together, are important. However, Jones (1987:21) reminds us that this is not the goal of social work. Herbert (in Jones 1987:20) suggests it is arrogant to elevate the importance of the relationship to unrealistic expectations where the therapist should be the most important person in the client's life. It is however necessary for the client to have sufficient trust and confidence in the therapist to participate effectively and to be optimistic about the treatment process.

Indirect work such as linking the client to resources provides tangible help and enables the client to see progress, e.g. introducing a volunteer, influencing policy or recommending care.

Research undertaken by Hollis, Reid and Mullen (in Jones 1987:26) confirms that the contents of interviews undertaken with adolescents comprise of approximately 60% of the time being taken up with description/ventilation by clients, with directive comments from the social worker making up less than 5% of the time. The overall impression is one of the client talking and the social worker listening. When the social worker does talk, reflective, rather than directive comments are made. In dealing with adolescents, the concept of non-judgementalism and non-directiveness are appropriate social work values for which particular verbal strategies must be adopted (Jones 1987:27). Social workers generally have a positive attitude and are genuinely concerned for adolescents in South Africa today, and in line with the professional values incorporated in social work practice, they do not appear to judge the troubled youths on their caseloads who display anti-social behaviour. The social worker will immediately alienate the youth if she lectures, admonishes or generally 'puts-down' the adolescent. However an interview that is aimless, where anything and everything they say is received with equanimity, with an absence of prescription and the inability of the worker to come up with a 'tangible' cure, even in the form of advice, will create a sense of aimlessness for the adolescent and produce

interviews of considerable length, during which workers seem to be firmly occupying the back seat (Baldock and Prior, in Jones 1987:27).

In the South African context, where resources are limited, there is a danger that the social worker will not be able to offer tangible help where this is all that would be necessary. An example of this may be assistance with the payment of school fees.

Although the above aspects are important in social work services to adolescents, it must be noted that communication is the key to a successful interview with an adolescent and direct communication is often not the best approach. Winnicott (in Jones 1987:27) feels it is far more effective to explore and connect via a 'third thing' - that is, an interest or activity that can be shared. This helps to establish a link and build a basis for trust. Hobson (1985) provides good examples of this skill in 'forms of feeling'. An activity can be utilised to improve the adolescent's perceptions of his social worker and can enhance their relationship. Group work often incorporates methods that lay the groundwork for trusting relationships. The worker must develop styles suitable for communicating with anxious, verbally hostile, defiant, defensive, dependant or indifferent youths.

Looking at the situation locally, preparing adolescents for adulthood is difficult when they are faced with different demands and pressures. In many cases these are part of the setting of unstable communities where crime, few job opportunities and violence are the norm. The child welfare system should be sensitive to specific problems and identify and either assist with or refer, educational, medical, social or psychological problems that become acute in adolescence, and were often not addressed at earlier stages of the adolescent's development (National Research Council 1993:189).

South African child welfare services are a public and private partnership which includes many players:

- * government provides some funding and policy direction
- * private charitable organisations provide direct services
- * individuals, who are often relatives, provide alternative care such as foster-care
- * families and children themselves play an integral part in the planning and provision of services.

The state and private agencies are often blamed when the system fails. However the success of the helping system depends on all role players and, beyond them, on the whole society (National Research Council 1993:199).

Child welfare in South Africa tends to separate services to children younger than 12 years, and services to teenagers from 13 to 18. Some child welfare agencies, in view of their heavy caseloads, do not deal with adolescents themselves but refer these cases to the Department of Welfare and Population Development, as they are seen as too problematic.

2.7. **Social work attitudes**

De Montigny (1995:40-78), a Canadian researcher, was the only author that could be located who has specifically observed the attitudes, values, traits and styles of social workers. He found they are often required to direct others, assume responsibilities, make decisions and work on a mental and interpersonal level. In addition they learn how to create their place in their work environment and develop a professional consciousness in order to operate as social workers within an institutional setting. The values of social service organisations are about fairness, equity, equality and human dignity, and these must be incorporated and accommodated. In order to carry out tasks, the social worker must enter into the reality of social work power and authority.

Social work traits which form part of the professional repertoire are orderliness, sensible communication, a presence marked by containment, control and

managed emotionality. Professional traits such as emotional composure, rationality and regulated expression would become integrated into the personality of the social worker.

Some social workers experience conflict in coming to terms with social work attitudes not aligned with personal attitudes. Despite these conflicts and difficulties student social workers, once qualified and employed in organisations, are compelled to enter and sort through the lives of their clients, when they give authoritative accounts of other peoples' lives, often without giving a second thought to the nature of the authority and control they exercise.

The courses of action in exercising mandated power in child protection organisations may bring social workers into direct conflict with clients. Social workers develop the skill to manage conflict. This is often done through reliance on a professional schemata whereby they either discount client's stories by exposing the client's self-centered motives or the client's limited understanding of the process and dynamics of the helping context.

The social work profession is composed of core skills, knowledge and values upon which the profession is based. These have emerged historically in research

and practical work. De Montigny (1995:45) states that "the concepts of the profession itself provides the tools for effecting control over a messy and often equivocally lived world - through issues of control, management, deliberate action and planned outcomes".

An aspect of social work that may not always be acceptable to social workers is when they are seen as bureaucrats. There are some professional and bureaucratic norms which are a direct contradiction. A social worker should be able to manage her place in the bureaucratic organisation of welfare. The cold, impersonal attitude associated with bureaucracy should be avoided in the completion of tasks such as filling in forms, gaining personal information, court attendance and applying for grants and legal aid. The social worker demonstrates a caring helping attitude by exhibiting empathy, warmth and genuineness to gain credibility (de Montigny 1995:46-51).

Research undertaken in South Africa by Ross (1996:98) indicates the attitudes of social workers are influenced by the social climate in which they work. The ecological paradigm adopts a holistic approach, incorporating all systems influencing social workers at a personal, family, work and broader system or macro level. Ross (1996:75-88) suggests the insecurity and political upheavals of the recent past have created a climate in which there is pervasive fear, insecurity

and uncertainty regarding the future of social welfare under the new dispensation. The rapid changes in South Africa have resulted in an increase in social problems, placing families under stress, increasing pathological symptoms such as substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, gangs and a high crime rate. Other factors which have had a negative effect on social workers are low remuneration, unsatisfactory working conditions, a poor image of social workers in the community, a lack of resources and facilities, and large caseloads. Goffman in (de Montigny 1995:56) suggests that being a social worker imposes on multiple dimensions of the social worker's life. Ferguson (in de Montigny 1995:56) suggests they engage in impression management, particularly in those aspects of themselves which are visible to others, such as dress, attitudes, vocabulary, talk and record keeping. Ferguson argues that social workers should demonstrate a commitment to the community and try to conduct their personal affairs in an exemplary manner. He concludes by postulating that social work is not just a job, but a way of life. However, de Montigny (1995:67) points out that there will be times when social workers are confronted with problems that they are unable to resolve, when they are forced to recognise their lack of knowledge or perhaps their biases and prejudices which create obstacles for them. Strategies to overcome these problems may involve discussions with a colleague or supervisor. It might also be helpful to seek answers by undertaking a literature research on the subject.

Another challenge is the difficulty South African social workers experience locating relevant professional literature unless they have access to a university library. It is important for social workers to regularly review legislation, policy and journals in order to improve and up-date their practice in special fields. Attending in-service training arranged by the Department of Welfare or NPOs such as the South African National Council for Child and Family Welfare is also recommended for maintaining and improving professional standards. Professional practice requires that order must be imposed on situations at hand in order for cases to be both intelligible and reportable within documents that can be presented before colleagues as properly worked-up cases. Field workers sometimes have limited contacts with their clients who present information that may be ambiguous, vague, biased and confusing. The field workers are then under pressure to develop an assessment of the case, identify relations between facts and arrive at a social diagnosis, problem assessment and treatment plan. Social workers are required to legitimise their practice by generating accounts that demonstrate their attempts to create order, make plans and structure interventions. Effective support depends on the development of realistic plans, coherent order and sound case management (de Montigny 1995:67). Unfortunately, social workers often feel caught as their ideals are betrayed by concrete work demands. They seldom have time to plan properly due to caseload of up to 120 cases, resulting in self doubt when questions such as the following are asked:

- * 'Am I doing enough?'
- * 'Am I responsible for the lack of progress on the case?'
- * 'Would improving my case management skills help?'
- * 'What can I do to be a better counsellor?'

The nature of the work carried out by field social workers in South Africa is mostly crisis intervention. They do not have the time to build idealised relations of trust, honesty and respect with their clients. Social workers cope by producing documentary proof that they have done the necessary work, although this is not the ideal which they aspired to as newly qualified social workers. The reality and organisational structure largely dictates the nature of the services social workers can provide, however de Montigny (1995:131) states "it is this reality that must serve as the beginning for enquiry - and not the fantasies of social work educators about what good social work should look like". Social workers in South Africa who are working for child and family care agencies have a number of pressures at agency level. The main pressure is financial as many agencies are threatened with closure, as a result their social workers experience a lack of job security.

2.8. The stress of social work counselling

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the stress and burnout experienced by social workers. While a number of studies have been carried out overseas, not much research has been done in South Africa (Smit 1990:124). Van der Walt (1993:134), a South African researcher, found that the profession carries a variety of inherent stressors related to burnout. Historically, social work is regarded as a risk-taking profession that has accepted the task and responsibility of upholding and implementing social and moral values to which the society may give only partial recognition (van der Walt 1993:134). Within the context of South Africa's diverse cultures, morality is a particularly difficult but relevant subject. Working with a group of adolescents who continually question the old order and test the accepted social boundaries can be particularly challenging for a social worker.

The stress incurred in making critical decisions and the pressure of attending to a constant succession of emergencies, requires psychological and emotional energy and strength. If no progress is made and there is no professional growth, this energy wains and feelings of frustration and fatigue lead to symptoms of burnout. Staff support groups are helpful in alleviating stress through sharing feelings and frustrations about work, and receiving support and advice from colleagues. Copans et al (in Zuckerman 1983:45) identify eleven categories of feelings and

processes that may negatively affect the social worker in her work with adolescents:

- * Anxieties about being physically harmed by angry clients and about the effects of decisions made by the social worker.
- * Denial and inhibition of anger.
- * The need for professional gratification from clients.
- * Lack of professional support.
- * Feelings of incompetence.
- * Denial and projections of responsibility.
- * The feeling that one is totally responsible for families assigned.
- * The difficulty separating personal from professional responsibility.
- * Feelings of being victimised.
- * Ambivalent feelings towards clients and one's professional role.
- * The need to be in control.

In addition to these feelings, Brearley (1982:29) suggests that social workers carry out a number of tasks which place their clients at risk and which create risk-taking opportunities for themselves and others. This involves making decisions

in the hope of attaining desired goals. Making decisions is usually related to taking action of some kind. Brearley (1982: 51-55) proposes that risk and responsibility are closely linked. Responsibility can be discussed on three levels - moral obligation, legal liability and organisational accountability. Decisions about risk are influenced by the degree of knowledge about possible outcomes, the degree of probability of each outcome occurring and the gravity of importance of each outcome.

Perhaps the major dilemma for social workers in risky situations is concerned with the balance between protection and control - between safety and freedom.

(Brearley 1982:55)

Southampton, Goldberg and Fruin (in Brearley 1982:138) suggest stress can be reduced by effective record keeping in which past activities, the present situation, future activities and aims are clearly outlined in case files. This enables the social worker to evaluate and plan her work with clients. Supervision can be more effectively carried out with accurate records and these will contribute to the planning of field work services. Efficient record keeping will also give an on-going account of the size, nature and scope of the social work activities, thereby providing an information system and enabling the exploration of possible

associations between the aims pursued in different problem situations and the methods and skill used.

Professional strategies and technique may help reduce stress. However, Jelsma (1990:48) is of the opinion that, in order to work with acting-out adolescents, the worker must either love them or refer them to another worker. In addition she must have a sense of humour, she must be able to tolerate being out of control occasionally and she must take risks in trying to help them as they have taken the risk of seeking help. The social worker must also accept that although there are rewards, a word of 'thanks' is rarely received.

Personality traits can also affect how stress is handled, Naesberg-Fenning, Fenning, Keinan and Elizur (in Dryden 1995:127) found that mental health professionals who had a high level of repressive ability, showed less burnout. These findings suggest that a social worker must to some extent distance herself emotionally when working with adolescents.

Other factors causing burnout are unclear communications, lack of autonomy and low staff support (Schneiger in Zuckerman 1983:44). Zuckerman (1983:43-44) looks at job satisfaction and stress, and points to feelings of gratification as being

one of the basic elements that arise out of a sense of accomplishment from seeing progress towards a goal. Social workers enter the profession because they enjoy interaction with people and have a desire to help their clients with their problems. If relationships are not fulfilling and the problems presented are not dealt with to some degree, social workers become disillusioned. Working with clients who do not accept help or are indifferent and apathetic results in a lack of accomplishment and frustration.

Social workers dealing with adolescents can employ strategies to prevent burnout. Van der Walt (1993:142) suggests that burnout can be prevented or reduced by good management at agency level with a thorough orientation for new social workers, adequate supervision and multi-professional team work. Individual strategies can be employed such as positive self-talk and a separation of work and home environments in which sport, hobbies and family provide relaxation and fulfillment.

2.9 Focus group research

The focus group is an invaluable social science research method, and provides a rich body of data expressed in the respondent's own words. Many research studies undertaken in the mental health field depend on quantitative data gathered

in structured interviews. The validity of this data is questionable, however, if the topic under review is only partially addressed. This issue is inherent in mental health research where complex topics are under investigation. Focus group research thus enhances the validity of mental health research questions (Powell, Single and Lloyd 1996:193).

Exploratory research of this nature generally consists of qualitative data gathered from respondents, enabling the researcher to learn more about the subject. Focus groups are the most appropriate method for eliciting the attitudes of social workers, as key issues can be identified and various points of view can be explored. (Morgan, in Rushton and Nathan 1996:358.)

According to Stewart and Shamdasane (1990:16), focus groups have a number of advantages which are explored in the following section.

A focus group provides data immediately from a group of social workers and at less cost and time than incurred if each individual were interviewed separately. The social workers can be assembled at much shorter notice than the time required for a more systematic and larger survey.

A focus group allows the researcher to interact directly with respondents. This provides opportunities for the clarification of responses, for follow-up questions and for the probing of responses. Respondents can qualify their responses or give alternative answers to questions. In groups of this nature, the researcher is able to observe non-verbal messages such as facial expressions and gestures. These will either reinforce or contradict what the respondent is saying.

The unstructured format of a focus group provides the opportunity to gather immense amounts of data based on personal attitudes that are essential for exploratory research. The researcher is able to link significant aspects of the information gathered.

Focus group members can comment on the responses of others in the group, thereby enabling the researcher to gather a broad and integrated body of information. The emergence of new information often occurs, resulting in the production of unanticipated facts and ideas. The flexibility of a focus group is invaluable for covering a range of topics with diverse respondents in different settings.

The focus group research method is suitable for gathering information from people with poor literacy skills or from children. This is particularly helpful in the South African research context. The data produced in focus group research is of a verbal nature and is therefore easy to understand. In addition, complex statistical analyses is not required.

The limitations of focus groups are:

- * only a small group of people participate in the research
- * each participant must respond individually for the researcher to gain perspective on the group as a whole
- * the researcher places greater credibility on 'live' responses from the respondents than on information gathered from statistical sources, and this may be misleading
- * open-ended responses are sometimes difficult to summarise and interpret
- * the group leader's attitude may influence the responses.

A focus group would provide the most effective research tool when not much is known about the subject, as in the case of social workers' attitudes in their work with troubled youths. According to Kitzinger (in Powell et al 1996:202-203),

mental health researchers have not utilised the focus group to its full potential in order to establish insights into explanatory frameworks and to highlight different forms and levels of knowing.

The advantage of the focus group method in comparison with a scheduled structured interview is that the non-directive method employed in a focus group allows the group members to communicate their feelings, agreement or disagreement of issues and to share experiences and attitudes. This enables the researcher to study the topic in depth in order to identify patterns and characteristics in group members' lives.

The researcher can find out why they hold these opinions and why they behave in a particular way (Powell et al 1996:196). A focus group provides a picture of the human situation in the context and interactions out of which it arises. This is compatible with the 'multi-systemic' view.

Focus groups provide a research method for inquiry and discovery. A clear definition of the problem or general research question must be formulated at the initial stage. The researcher or moderator must have a clear understanding of the subject to enable her to formulate relevant questions to be put to the respondents

and to identify the population. The main task of the moderator is to elicit the information necessary to achieve the goals of the research proposal. She should have the ability to grasp things quickly, understand the subject under review and be able to define boundaries in order to eliminate superfluous information. The moderator should understand and respond quickly to the group members' input.

Greenbaum (1988:46) recommends the moderator display a friendly disposition to develop rapport with the group immediately, enabling the members to feel comfortable and to contribute honestly by providing genuinely considered responses. The moderator should communicate a fair knowledge of the subject, although, a 'know-it-all' attitude should be avoided. A good memory enables the moderator to note the group process and integrate information, while the ability to listen effectively and be flexible is essential to allow the group session to flow naturally. An empathic attitude towards group members will encourage them to feel accepted. The ability to identify relevant contributions and summarise are group leader skills which promote discussion and subtly focus on significant issues. Report writing skills are necessary for the production of written summaries of the group interaction and for intelligent conclusions to be drawn from the group process.

Focus groups have been successful in social work research and would be particularly useful in establishing social workers' attitudes towards different categories of clients. It would stimulate their curiosity and interest in the challenging area of adolescent services. The data collected could provide valuable information for in-service training modules for social workers in the field of child and family welfare. Denning and Verschelden (1993:578) confirm that the focus group method contributes to the participants' sense of significance and renders their interventions with adolescents more interesting challenging and rewarding, and their roles within their agencies more relevant to them.

2.10 Conclusion

In examining the literature concerning social work services to troubled youths and exploring the nature of focus group research, it is evident that there has been little research undertaken in South Africa. The aim of this study is to draw attention to this area of service. It appears that some child welfare agencies do not provide any services while others provide only limited services to adolescents. The additional goal of this study is therefore to make social workers aware of the impact of this policy.

CHAPTER 3

EMPIRICAL DATA

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter the data taken from the video-taped session is summarised and the responses to the questions are analysed. The group consisted of six social workers from four child welfare agencies in Gauteng. The themes that emerge from the discussion are identified and a content analysis provides quantitative data enabling the researcher to separate the positive and negative answers. The themes are then explored and discussed.

3.2 Data analysis

A summary of the responses to the research questions is given below. Where a response was given some time after the original question it was necessary to link the response to the question in order for it to be meaningful. Questions 2 and 3 were combined as they explored similar issues while the responses to questions 7 and 10 are examined together. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990:102) confirm that the nature of the analysis of focus group data should be determined by the

research questions and the purposes for which the data are collected. Non-verbal responses such as nodding or shaking of the head, facial expressions or smiling were noted. These were generally expressions of confirmation in relation to what other group members were saying.

The facilitator's bias is that social workers find their work with troubled youths stressful because they are under pressure from parents to remove the problem child immediately, the parents relinquish their parental responsibilities, the placement of youths is not always in their best interests nor does it meet their particular needs and the placement options are limited. In addition, they do not receive adequate support from their agencies in the form of in-service training and supervision, are hampered by their unfamiliarity with approaches such as ecological and systems theories and lack skills such as family therapy. This knowledge and support would empower them and promote their capacity to provide a professional services to uncontrollable youths and their families.

The focus group's responses to the questions are given in the following section.

3.2.1 What does adolescent mean?

The respondents spontaneously verbalised the meaning of adolescence extensively. Ten different descriptions were given, five of which dealt with the

interpersonal and social challenges teenagers must deal with. Teenagers start to question their identity and adjust their self-image as they approach adulthood.

The teenager is vulnerable to negative influences which can result in destructive behaviour. The teenager is also subject to hormonal changes which may influence his or her behaviour. The responses indicate that the group members are more sensitive to the identity and self-concept adjustments that teenagers must deal with than with other aspects, such as physical changes. The group members were very responsive, sharing their ideas and own experiences with regard to adolescence.

3.2.2 Where do my ideas about adolescence come from? Does my family background influence my work with teenagers?

Questions 2 and 3 rendered overlapping responses. Ten responses were given. Four of these related to the respondents' own experiences as teenagers. Three answers did not focus on personal encounters, but dealt with factors such as the teenagers they deal with in the course of their work, the articles they read about teenagers and the experiences of teenagers in South Africa today. The younger social workers relied on their memories of themselves as teenagers to assist them in understanding the teenagers they deal with. Two group members found that the understanding gained from their own teenage children has had a strong influence on their understanding of the adolescents who are part of their case

load. One respondent said that her experiences as a teenager have not had an impact on her work. Kurt Godel (in Keeney 1983:78) argues that there is no way of getting rid of the self-referential paradox which is a natural part of any formal system of thinking. The differences in attitudes were influenced by the age of the group member and by her experience with teenagers.

3.2.3 How do I feel about the adolescents I know?

The social workers expressed their concern for teenagers. Three responses dealt with the dangers faced by teenagers, such as drugs, the parents' lack of skills in preparing their children for adolescence and the fact that teenagers have more issues to deal with than the group members did during their own adolescence. The respondents also agreed that teenagers today are under more pressure than they themselves were as teenagers.

3.2.4 How confident do I feel in my work with adolescents?

There were 17 responses to this question. Eight responses indicated that social workers do not have sufficient time to deal effectively with cases of uncontrollable teenagers (this was the attitude of all the group members), and this undermines their confidence and ability. Five responses dealt with the importance of building a trusting relationship with the youth, which in many cases the group members are unable to do due to various constraints. Other responses, such as large caseloads, a lack of experience with teenagers,

conservative childhood experiences and stress suggested that the group members were not confident in their work with troubled teenagers. The need for programmes and group work for troubled teenagers was discussed at length. However, only one child welfare agency is planning a peer counselling programme for teenagers.

3.2.5 Does the agency I work for have set procedures that determine the nature of interventions with troubled youths?

The responses indicate there is recognition that each case involving uncontrollable teenagers is unique. The group members therefore find it difficult to use set procedures. Some group members stated that they would prefer a more structured therapeutic process. There are guidelines employed in general casework that can be helpful such as a contract between the parties which sets out the goals and tasks required of each participant. However, contracts appear to be used haphazardly and there is generally a lack of follow-up by the social worker.

3.2.6 Are the troubled teenager and family dealt with as individuals or as an inter-related system?

Nine responses to this question were offered. Three responses related to problems experienced with the parents. The peer group, schools and teachers are also regarded as significant influences in a teenager's life. Two responses

confirmed that a social worker cannot deal with the teenager in isolation. One respondent felt it was necessary to work on two levels, with the teenager as an individual and with the systems affecting the teenager, i.e. parents and teachers.

3.2.7 Is a team approach employed, involving regular consultation with a supervisor or colleagues?

Ten responses indicate the group's members do not work in teams. The following question would have been more appropriate: Do you feel you have adequate support and regular supervision to assist you in your work with uncontrollable teenagers? It is obvious from all the responses that support and consultation from colleagues are regarded as essential on both formal and informal levels. The larger agencies have regular meetings or consultations with a supervisor or senior social worker. Two respondents felt cases involving uncontrollable teenagers should be dealt with by a specialised team of social workers.

3.2.8 Do I feel that I have a wide enough knowledge of the theory and techniques to provide effective counselling?

Five responses were proffered, indicating that the group members do think it is important to keep themselves abreast of the literature on modern techniques and theories. One member said this was a professional responsibility. The internet was sighted as a good source of articles. One respondent pointed out that social

workers must not only have a knowledge of the modern theories and techniques but also of the environmental influences that may affect teenagers negatively. Concern was expressed with regard to raves, easy access to drugs, exposure to violence on television and the internet where pornographic material is available to teenagers which are part of the teenage culture. A direct answer to this question was not given.

3.2.9 Are systemic family therapy techniques employed?

The general response was negative and no discussion was entered into. The group members stated clearly they are not familiar with any of the systemic family therapy models.

3.2.10 Are there sufficient resources for troubled teenagers in South Africa?

The response from all group members was negative. This topic is also indirectly covered in Question 14 where it was confirmed that the resources for troubled teenagers in South Africa are inadequate. (The group members are concerned about the lack of resources, but did not offer solutions or suggest innovative ways of dealing with this problem.)

3.2.11 What preventative strategies do I employ before opening a Children's Court enquiry?

There was a lot of discussion around this question, and 27 responses were given. The group members feel strongly about this issue, indicating that this is an area that requires attention. One respondent acknowledged the importance of preventative work with the teenager and family before opening a Children's Court enquiry. Two responses dealt with teenagers in foster-care, and indicated that these teenagers are particularly vulnerable. Seven responses stressed that the group members feel social workers take too much responsibility for the parents. The responsibilities cited had to do with making decisions on behalf of the family concerning the teenager's future. This occurs when parents insist their child has a problem but do not commit themselves to working with the social worker in order to acquire parenting skills or to participate in family therapy. Such parents are usually unable to see their situation in a family context, and distance themselves from the problem. Eight responses dealt with the role of the parents and the difficulties experienced with the parents. The respondents are frustrated by the actions and attitudes of the parents who they often find apathetic as they lack the emotional energy and commitment to participate in therapy. The group members felt social workers accept more responsibilities than they should do. This is related to the natural tendency of social workers to want to help people, their frustrations with the parents' passive attitude towards

the troubled youths' problems and the parents' lack of understanding of the difficulties and problems in the present welfare system. However, there is an acknowledgement of the important role the parents play in their children's problems and the necessity for them to participate in therapeutic intervention. It was evident from two responses that there is a general feeling of pressure and inadequacy which stems from the threat of a ministerial investigation by the Department of Welfare and Population Development. The risk that a social worker takes with regard to the placement of youths in facilities which are not ideal and which threaten their physical safety is an important factor that adds to the pressure social workers experience when dealing with cases of uncontrollable youths. This was pointed out by two group members in the discussion. A response referred to the Department of Welfare's 'Draft Discussion Document for the Transformation of the South African Child and Youth Care System' directive that there should be movement away from the placement of teenagers in institutions, and where possible social workers should seek alternative placement options. Two responses focused on schools where there may be a lack of cooperation between the social workers and the principals of the schools. Principals are concerned that the rules and regulations of the school are upheld and are not prepared to accommodate a child who does not conform, whilst social workers focus on the developmental and emotional needs and acknowledge the uniqueness of each troubled teenager.

3.2.12 Do I have a feeling of having failed professionally if I open a Children's Court enquiry?

Four responses dealt with four different aspects. These responses were not direct answers to the question, but had obviously been well thought out. The group members do not appear to consciously measure their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in cases of uncontrollable teenagers. The general feeling appears to be that social workers should not feel they have failed when they provide services taking into account the constraints and difficulties such as the lack of suitable placement options, educational opportunities and agency constraints, i.e. support systems and training. Historically, in South Africa, child and family welfare agencies referred troubled teenagers to the Department of Welfare. A few societies continue to do this, as these cases are regarded as problematic and time consuming. Other constraints that were mentioned here were entrenched patterns in the troubled youth's family such as substance abuse or a pattern of dropping out of school, the limited time which social workers are able to devote to counselling and the lack of facilities for troubled youths. However, there was an acknowledgement by one respondent that a social worker has failed professionally when she opens a Children's Court enquiry as a result of pressure by parents, without fully investigating the troubled youth's circumstance and without providing the necessary therapeutic input.

3.2.13 Do the institutions selected for the children meet their particular needs or are there simply no available options?

There was general consensus that there is often no choice in selecting a suitable alternative care institution. Most troubled youths have special needs with regard to their educational, psychological circumstances and behaviour. Existing facilities are seldom able to provide remedial education, adequate therapy and a structured environment suitable for these youths. Fosterparents who will take teenagers are very difficult to find. In many cases the children remain in places of safety for extended periods until admission to an industrial school is obtained. One response was positive, reminding the group members that other placement options are available apart from industrial schools, but these have to be sought or even developed informally in the community. One example given was that of 'The Rock', where a married couple who live in a suburb are prepared to accommodate approximately eight troubled teenagers at one time.

3.2.14 What feasible recommendations for changes to the services for troubled youths can be made?

Eleven responses were given. Peer counselling was seen as an important way to work with teenagers at the prevention level. Three responses confirmed this. One respondent stressed the need to work with the whole family systemically. However, the group members had previously indicated that they are not familiar with the principles of systems theory or systemic family therapy. Three responses

referred to a resource (a therapeutic group for parents and teenagers) which is presently under utilised and which should be made more accessible to families who have troubled teenagers. Two responses confirmed that the primary responsibility of the social worker is to determine whether the youth was in physical danger whilst living at home. If this was not the case, all efforts should be made to employ preventative interventions in order to avoid removing the child from his or her family. Two respondents emphasised the social worker's task to encourage the parents to take responsibility for their troubled teenagers. A group member said that in some cases, the parents feel they are absolved of the responsibilities of their teenager following the opening of a Children's Court enquiry and are often not required or prepared to commit themselves to working towards a resolution of their teenager's problems.

3.3 Content analysis

Table 1: The themes emerging from the focus group discussion

Questions	Emerging themes
1,2,3	identity issues personal experience (self) personal experience with own teenage children
4	---
5	time relationships
6	---
7	parents
8	---
9	---
10	---
11	---
12	responsibility school foster parents parents minister's office risk
13, 14	foster parents
15	risk parents

Table 2: Positive and negative responses

Question	Subject	Answers	
		Positive	Negative
1 to 3	The respondents' personal experiences with adolescence.	19	1
4	The respondents' feelings about the adolescents they work with.		4
5 to 15	The respondents' attitude towards their work with adolescents.	39	55

Positive answers indicate feelings of confidence, knowledge and experience.

Negative answers indicate feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, frustration or lack of knowledge.

3.4 The emerging themes

The themes to emerge during the discussion are outlined below. Primary themes are identity issues, personal experience with teenagers, time, relationships, parents, responsibility, cases reported to the minister of welfare and the risks inherent in work with troubled teenagers. The facilitators' bias in identifying and interpreting the themes is the concern that the parents so often relinquish their parental responsibilities and do not co-operate with the social worker in trying to keep their teenager out of the residential care system.

3.4.1 Identity issues and personal experience

The younger group members based their ideas about teenagers on their own experiences. The group members who have teenage children based their ideas of teenagers on their experiences of their own teenage children. Actual incidents that occurred as a teenager or with their own teenage children were discussed. It is clear that social workers are strongly influenced by their personal experiences, and that ideas of normative teenage behaviour arise out of personal experience. The group members are more sympathetic toward adolescents than toward the parents. The group member who stated that she does not base her work with teenagers on her own experience as a teenager does not have children and is older

than 35. Two group members from Afrikaans speaking backgrounds admitted to having conservative histories, but recognised the need to be more liberally minded when working with teenagers today.

3.4.2 Time

The comments indicated that work with adolescents and their families tended to be more time consuming than general casework. Group work with teenagers requires a commitment for the social worker to be available to group members after working hours in the event of a crisis. The group members admitted that they did not feel they could make this commitment and did not have sufficient time to devote to their cases involving troubled youths.

3.4.3 Relationships

The group members all acknowledged that relationships in the family should be explored as it is essential to work with the whole family and not just the teenager in these cases. They unanimously agreed that their relationship with the teenager was a pivotal factor in their work with troubled youths. Two group members admitted that, in some cases they could not build an effective relationship with their teenage clients and

that establishing an effective relationship with a troubled teenager was often difficult and time consuming.

3.4.4 Parents and foster parents

The issues relating to the parents were discussed 13 times. Most of these were negative, ranging from poor parenting to a lack of understanding of the needs of teenagers. The parents often have unrealistic expectations with regard to the welfare system, such as expecting the social worker to solve their problems. All group members experienced problems such as lack of parental commitment to work with the social worker, questionable parenting skills and non-acceptance of parental responsibilities. In the case of foster parents, the discussion focused on the scarcity of suitable foster parents and problems experienced with the placement of troubled teenagers who have difficulty adjusting to new rules and discipline, often exhibiting behaviour which is unacceptable in the foster family. Foster care is a placement option requiring careful consideration as to the capacity of the foster parents to cope with a troubled youth, which then requires close monitoring and support from the social worker.

3.4.5 Responsibility

The issue of parental responsibility and the social worker's responsibility was frequently raised during the discussion. In many cases of troubled teenagers, the members acknowledged that they are not encouraging parents to accept responsibility for their teenage children. The facilitator believes that the social worker's role is to assist the parents in finding a solution to their problem, and not to assume responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the parents. However, most group members felt they were drawn into taking over the responsibility for solving problems and making decisions on behalf of the family as a result of the parents' apathy, their lack of parenting skills, their poor knowledge of the welfare system or their emotional fatigue. The group members indicated that social workers may lack the confidence and training required to deal with what they experience as uncooperative and resistant parents.

3.4.6 Schools and industrial schools

The group members agreed that although industrial schools are often not an ideal placement for a troubled youth, there are very few alternatives for placement. In some cases the troubled youth is placed at more risk as a result of the negative influences they are exposed to in industrial schools. The members also mentioned problems they had with children absconding from or being expelled from industrial schools. There was general consensus that industrial schools do

not meet the needs of most troubled youths. These needs are educational, emotional and psychological, safety, discipline and containment. The group's experience of school principals is their focus on academic performance and conformity, and not on the individual teenager's emotional needs.

3.4.7 Cases reported to the minister of welfare

A case illustration was presented when a member was reported to the minister's office by the parents. This is related to the concepts of responsibility and risk. The parents hold the social worker responsible, especially when something goes wrong. For example, when there are incidents in children's homes which place the child at further risk. Such an enquiry requires additional reports and attendance at panel meetings. Group members provided many examples of how they felt their professional opinion had been ignored at such inquiries, to the detriment of the children or teenagers concerned.

3.4.9 Risk

Group members agreed that, when working with troubled youths, the primary task of the social worker is to assess whether the teenager's life is threatened or whether he or she is in a high risk situation which may involve emotional or sexual abuse, from which the teenager should be removed immediately. The

necessity of having to make immediate decisions of dire consequence to the teenager, family and related social systems, places social workers under pressure and causes stress.

3.5 Conclusion

Throughout the focus group discussion the facilitator detected evidence of cognitive processes and self-talk. These enabled the members to structure and organise their thoughts as they related their experiences at work to their various attitudinal stances or life philosophies. Such mechanisms enable them to perceive their responsibilities and stress as a challenge, empowering them to add meaning to their work and so enhance their professional identity and accept their limitations. This releases them from a sense of guilt and responsibility for their client's problems. They were unaware, however, that there is a tendency to rationalise and shift the blame for difficult cases on to the parents, institutions and the political climate.

The political pressure at welfare agencies is for attention to be focused on community-based poverty alleviation and developmental social work services, with a movement away from work with individuals. The group members are having difficulty accommodating to this directive while coping with ever-

increasing caseloads which need individual attention. There is general agreement amongst the group members of the necessity for supervision and in-service training for general case management as this is often absent in the present cost-cutting circumstances. The two group members who are involved in further studies appeared to recognise there should be a paradigm shift towards a more holistic and systemic approach to therapy. Other group members who are not familiar with systems or ecological theories, did not identify this need.

CHAPTER 4

EMPIRICAL DATA – FOLLOW-UP GROUP

4.1 Introduction

A follow-up group session was convened to further explore the themes that emerged in the initial group discussion and to establish the direction in which the social workers feel their work with troubled teenagers should be moving. In preparation for the focus group session a second questionnaire was faxed to the members four days before the meeting (Appendix II). Six themes identified as important by the facilitator were outlined. Three themes, those of identity issues, personal experience and time, were not included as they were not regarded as subjects which required further exploration. The exclusion of these issues is based on two factors: they are inherent issues in general casework, and they were explored quite extensively in the initial discussion. The issues surrounding the remaining six themes featured again strongly in the participants' discussion about their work with troubled teenagers.

4.2 Data Analysis

The facilitator's bias in the data analysis of the second focus group is that the social workers feel overburdened and helpless in their work with troubled youths and tend to look for a scapegoat by blaming the parents, the welfare system or the limited resources.

4.3 Responses to the questions

The responses to the questions are presented below.

4.3.1 How can we change and improve our services?

The responses indicated that parents and their children are unclear about the services offered by child and family welfare agencies and are unsure of their rights. The group reiterated that the parents, in many cases, are avoiding parental responsibilities. Instead they are placing the responsibility for making decisions with regard to their teenage children onto the social worker, who then is held responsible when things go wrong, i.e. the teenager absconds, is unhappy or becomes involved with a negative peer group. The group members suggested a contract be signed, clarifying the goals, responsibilities and services offered. The contract should be signed by the social worker, the youth concerned and the parents. The contract should clearly set out the parental responsibilities and the necessity for them to participate in therapeutic programmes when necessary. The establishment of a family therapy unit would assist social workers in their endeavours to mend or avoid a breakdown in family relationships. At present funds are not available for such a unit, one of the reasons being that specialised services are not seen as a priority by the present government. It was recommended that a meeting be held with the South African National Council for Child and Family Welfare and the Department of Welfare and Population

Development to discuss issues such as the role of industrial schools and the admission criteria for children's homes.

4.3.2 The suggestion has been made that we need to work with the whole family.

Do we have the skills to do this, however?

One group member felt that social workers relied on their basic counselling skills in interventions with families. It appears from the dialogue that the social workers do not use family therapy as a method of intervention as they do not have a knowledge of family therapy techniques. In certain cases the group members considered therapeutic interventions such as parental skills training and individual therapy to be too time consuming and not really effective, particularly in cases where considerable damage has been incurred in the youth's relationships. In cases where there is constant conflict resulting in a breakdown in communication, the parent's frustration is manifested by rejection and a drawing of boundaries between the youth and the family.

4.3.3 It is evident that we are seeing more complicated family problems involving adolescents, which often include abuse of substances by the adolescent or by the parent(s). Do we feel qualified to deal with these problems?

One group member stated that she did not feel qualified to deal with problems such as substance abuse. Individual family members are referred to a specialist

organisation for rehabilitation. Another group member felt that she could not offer any specialised intervention and is a 'jack of all trades, master of none'. The group members support the view that specialised knowledge is often required as they are seeing more problems such as drug abuse.

4.3.4 Do we want to keep families together?

One group member considered it natural to want to keep families together. However, it was agreed by the group members that in many cases, when families come to child welfare it is a last resort. The families have thus already made the decision that they want their child placed in a children's home or in an industrial school, and there is little the social worker can do to change their minds. Another member pointed out that there are insufficient resources in the present system to assist social workers to keep families together. Although the group members acknowledged the importance of keeping families intact, they feel inadequately trained to provide specific therapeutic services themselves, and only infrequently refer the family to support organisations such as churches or Famsa (Family Life South Africa) in cases of uncontrollable youths.

4.3.5 How can we become more involved in preventative strategies?

The need to focus on preventative programmes was reiterated by two members. A peer counselling programme being launched by a child welfare society was regarded as a good preventative effort. It was pointed out that uncontrollable

teenagers often have parents who are an integral part of the problem. The 'STEP' and 'STEP Teen' courses are regarded as useful preventative programmes. However, only one society has a STEP courses running at present. The societies are all experiencing difficulty in getting the parents to attend the courses.

4.3.6. The National Council for Child and Family Welfare is investigating a pooled service in east Gauteng. What is your view of a collective service? How do you see your own contribution to this?

There were divergent views in response to this questions. One social worker felt that the pooling of resources would be a good idea while another social worker felt that the logistics of trying to organise pooled services may prove to be a problem. Two social workers agreed that a family therapy unit for the child welfare organisations in east Gauteng should be established. A group member stated that specialised, pooled services would not be viable in the light of the expectations of the Department of Welfare and Population Development. The Department has informed NPO's that they are now expected to provide generic services, i.e. non-specialised services to all members of their communities. However, this would mean that Child Welfare agencies are offering the same services at the same level as the Department; these services are basic counselling and statutory intervention.

4.4 Discussion of the emerging themes

The themes that emerged in the first focus group discussion were presented to the group members for further discussion and their comments are as follows:

4.4.1 Relationships

The relationships within the family and between the social worker and the family are considered important. In most cases of troubled youths the relationships in the family are problematic, not only between the youth and his parents, but also with members of the extended family. This was illustrated in the examples given by the focus group members. The examples discussed indicated that family relationships often reach a point where communication systems have broken down. In these cases the worker's primary role is to establish a trusting relationship with the troubled youth in which he or she feels physically and emotionally safe and can communicate openly. The social worker does this by respecting the teenager's strengths, dignity, cultural, religious and linguistic orientation, and develops a client-centered counselling relationship with the troubled youth by effectively communicating genuine acceptance, empathy and commitment. The social worker should demonstrate the same respect for the parents and be aware of the possible implications of their resistance and helplessness should she undermine their authority or parental roles and responsibilities. This may be difficult to do in

view of the perspective of the group members that the parents are generally unco-operative in the treatment plan.

4.4.2 **Parents**

As in the initial focus group discussion, the comments about the parents were negative and related to parental responsibilities. A typical comment was “they have the expectation that the welfare will take over their responsibilities”. Parents should be made aware that removal of a child is a last resort. In order to empower the parents they should be encouraged to participate in the plan of action for the problem resolution. The parents and youth should be informed that they may be expected to participate in a family preservation programme which would require either participation in a therapeutic group or family therapy. The parents must be encouraged to participate fully in the decision making process and programmes. At present, in view of the group members’ general perspective and acceptance of the parents’ helplessness, the social worker may be colluding with the parents without properly exploring their feelings and empowering them to accept their responsibility to participate in the planning towards solving the problems experienced by their teenager.

4.4.3 **Responsibilities**

It is clear that there is a firm belief by social workers that parents are not assuming responsibility for their teenage child. The focus group participants also

consider that they, themselves, are taking on too much responsibility in making decisions for the parents and the youth. A social worker who is left largely to her own devices with irregular or no supervision, easily allows herself to be drawn into the family's web of problematic relationships. These relationships could obscure her goals for empowering the family to make their own decisions and solve their own problems. The statutory rights, responsibilities and complaint procedures should be made explicit so the family and the youth have a clear understanding of the importance of their input and participation in the therapeutic and statutory process. At present many parents are not always aware that they can obtain legal representation or cannot avail themselves of the legal aid system because their income is too high to qualify for legal aid but, at the same time, they cannot afford to pay for private legal services.

4.4.4 Schools, industrial schools and children's homes

It was unanimously agreed that, at present, the industrial schools fail to meet the complex needs of troubled teenagers. The reasons for this failure are that the schools do not provide adequate and professional counselling to enable the youth to deal with the troubled emotions of anger and feelings of rejection and, in many cases, a need for discipline and containment. Children's homes were accused of dictating the terms of the placement, despite the fact that these may be detrimental to the wellbeing of the youth concerned. For example, a children's home may accept a child as a one-year placement which will not be extended, when in some

cases the social worker is of the opinion that the child's family will need longer than one year to provide adequate care for their child. The children's homes were accused of being too selective, especially in the case of troubled youths.

4.4.5 **The office of the Minister of Welfare**

The participants accept that parents have a right to report their case to the Minister of Welfare if they feel they have received an unprofessional service. It was acknowledged that some social workers in child and family care agencies in eastern Gauteng lack professionalism. The group members, however, identified themselves with high standards of professionalism and felt they were doing a good job under difficult circumstances. Three group members experienced frustration and anger in dealings with such inquiries. The group members who had been involved in a ministerial inquiry were of the opinion that the supervising social worker's views were not acknowledged in ministerial investigations. This concern had been expressed in the first focus group discussion and demonstrates that group members feel frustrated by having their indepth knowledge of the case ignored. However, the family and the troubled youth have the right to refer their case to an independent inquiry. Families are not always informed by the social worker of this right.

4.4.6 Risks

The group members consider their work with uncontrollable teenagers as carrying inherent risks, for example, being accused of unprofessional conduct and encountering personal resistance in dealing with youths who are criminals or drug addicts. Social workers can find themselves in risky situations where they are in physical danger. There is also a risk of a ministerial inquiry should the youth's family feel their rights have been violated. Social workers have felt responsible for cases of children being placed in institutions and being unhappy or absconding and being on the run. The youths who enter the welfare system have a right to a safe environment where they are protected from physical harm, or threat of harm from self and others, and this is something the social worker cannot guarantee under the present circumstances. Some social workers can cope with the these risks and the stresses they incur, while others are more susceptible to burnout. The group members agreed that social work is a profession where one has to make decisions which involve some risk.

4.5 Conclusion

The members did not answer the questions directly or offer constructive ideas to address the problems which they experience. It is clear that they feel overburdened and are unable explore solutions and move on. The group members had a need to ventilate their general feelings of helplessness and frustration. There was a recognition that the adolescents' needs and feelings of unhappiness appear

to be largely overlooked, and because of this acknowledgement, the social workers have strong feelings of empathy towards the troubled youth.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the literature study and the findings of the two focus groups. The feelings and ideas of the group members are explored and discussed in terms of various themes. Recommendations are made for the management of troubled youths, and strategies are suggested for assisting social workers in the examination of their personal ideas to promote a positive approach to their work.

5.2 The research question

The research question posed is: "What are social workers' attitudes towards troubled teenagers?". The aim of this research was to explore the viewpoints and feelings of social workers in their work with troubled teenagers. The following objectives were set:

- * to conduct a literature review of social workers attitudes of troubled youth
- * to facilitate social workers' reflection on their work with troubled youths by means of two focus groups
- * to make recommendations for the management of troubled youth.

The context in which the research was implemented is characterised by a time of rapid change in legislative policies and in provincial welfare departments. These changes represent a range of challenges and are reflected in the concerns raised in the six themes identified during the discussion.

5.3 **Literature review**

The literature study was aimed at exploring literature related to the research topic. The researcher was unable to locate South African literature on the specific subject of social workers' attitudes towards their work with troubled youths. However, where possible South African sources on related subjects were located.

Research conducted on teenagers in South Africa generally focusses on issues such as drugs and alcohol, educational issues, pregnancy/illegitimacy, sex education and the Human Immune Deficiency Virus. The researcher was unable to find literature that dealt specifically with social workers' attitudes to troubled youths in an international search. Authors such as Crompton (1982), de Montigny (1995) and Jones (1987) deal with related issues such as the general attitudes of social workers towards their work and the nature of relationships between troubled youths and their social workers. These were found to be relevant to this study.

The researcher's theoretical bias is influenced by the ecosystem approach on which individual and family therapy models are based. This is helpful in understanding the troubled youth in his or her own environment. The changing welfare systems in South Africa have an impact on social work attitudes. The group members strongly acknowledged the need to work with the youth, his or her family, the peer group and teachers, although they also confirmed they are not familiar with a theory that would enable them to work with these social systems in a holistic way. Literature on systems theory and the ecosystems model was readily available. Researchers (Newton et al, in Ross 1996) stress the need to place the individual worker within a historical, social and political context in which it is necessary to go beyond the individual to incorporate ecosystems interventions. The ecosystems paradigm, with its emphasis on reciprocal transactions between people and their environments, includes interventions at the personal, family, work/school and broader societal systems levels. The premise of this model is that individuals can take stock of their lives, assess their strengths, weaknesses and stress management capacity, to devise plans which incorporate any or all of these different systems to enhance their functioning (Keeney 1983:132-134).

The literature was found to support the idea that the attitude of the social worker towards specific clients has an impact on herself and her clients. Compton (1982) and Jones (1987) look at the relationship between the social worker and the youth, and provide core ideas in terms of which the questions in the questionnaire used in this study were formulated. De Montigny (1995) looks specifically at how social work attitudes permeate all areas of the social worker's life. He also examines the conflicts that may arise due to personal ideals and the demands of the social work profession. Ross (1996) shows how the attitudes of social workers in South Africa are influenced by the social climate.

The meaning of adolescence is explored. The literature reveals that this is a time of change and challenges for the youth, particularly in South Africa at present.

Stress and burnout are hazards of the social work profession. Most studies consulted made recommendations for preventing burnout, some of which were included in the literature study. A good South African source, that is Van der Walt (1993), was helpful in providing information about the stresses experienced by social workers locally.

The literature on focus groups of local and international origin sets out the value of this research method in exploratory research. The flexibility and capacity of focus group research to accommodate a rich body of data that may be lost in more structured methods of research are acknowledged to be the primary advantages of this method.

5.4 **The facilitation of social workers' reflections on their work with troubled youths**

Social workers' reflections on their work with troubled youths were facilitated by means of two focus groups. Questions were used to stimulate discussion. Six themes that emerged during the first focus group that were regarded as the helpful in enabling the group members to move forward, were included for further discussion in the second focus group. The questions were divided under three headings: knowledge and personal experience with teenagers, feelings about teenagers and the provision of services to teenagers. These three categories were assessed in terms of positive and negative responses.

The group members were regarded as experts in their field of service and the researcher attempted to demonstrate to the respondents that their attitudes, opinions and insights are valid and respected. The researcher commenced the focus group discussions with an overview of the purpose of

the group, that is, to encourage the members to explore their experiences, their frustrations, and innovations, and to suggest possible improvements, in their work with troubled youths. The full attendance of the focus group members demonstrated their motivation in exploring their attitudes. The researcher encouraged them to be sensitive to the impact that their attitudes have in their work with troubled youths. The group members developed a good repartee and in a number of instances supported and acknowledged each other in sharing similar experiences and feelings through minimal verbal responses.

The focus group was also aimed at stimulating the group members to explore and share relevant ideas which would benefit both them and their agencies. For example, survival skills for social workers who have large caseloads, limited time and limited resources. The members also shared ideas for prevention programmes and resources available to youths.

5.4.1 Knowledge, attitudes and personal experience with teenagers

Questions 1, 2 and 3 dealt with the group member's knowledge, attitudes and personal experience with teenagers. There were nineteen positive answers and one negative answer. The group members have a good

understanding of the concept of adolescence and have an empathetic attitude towards the adolescents on their caseloads. They feel that many of the troubled youths they deal with are victims of bad parenting and an unsympathetic educational system, who have to face many challenges without family support. The group members used these questions to reconsider their own teenage experiences. The following themes emerged:

Self-concept: The respondents recognise there are a number of challenges teenagers must deal with during adolescence with regard to their changing identity as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Very often these teenagers are in unsupportive environments with poor role models and little encouragement. Very often teenagers have low self-esteem as a result of the lack of support and problematic family relationships.

Personal experience: The respondents related how their personal experiences as teenagers or experience with their own teenage children assist them to understand and work with teenagers.

5.4.2 **Feelings about teenagers**

The responses to the question regarding feelings towards adolescents were negative. This indicates that group members are concerned about teenagers

in South Africa today. Adolescents are faced with many challenges and social workers are only too aware of the problems that arise when teenagers fail to make the right choices to enhance their life prospects and opportunities. The group members do not have confidence in the parents' ability to prepare their teenage children for these challenges. The respondents also feel more negative about their own abilities or lack confidence in their skills to effectively deal with troubled adolescents.

5.4.3 **The provision of services to teenagers**

Questions 5 to 15 dealt with the provision of services to teenagers and their families in child and family welfare agencies. The total number of positive responses to these questions is 39 while the total number of negative responses is 55.

The emerging themes are outlined below:

Time: It is evident that group members do not feel that they have sufficient time to devote to their cases involving troubled youths and their families. Their caseloads are large, comprising between 70 and 100 cases. Some social workers cannot carry out the required therapeutic work due to the limited hours in which they work, for example, 25 hours per week.

Relationships: The group members recognise that unless a trusting relationship is established with the teenager and his or her family, effective therapeutic intervention is not possible. The members gave examples of cases in which they do their utmost to establish a positive therapeutic relationship with the troubled youth and the parents, but find themselves getting drawn into problematic family relationships where it is difficult to remain neutral.

Parents/foster parents: The social workers recognise the importance of working closely with the parents, although a number of difficulties were identified in this regard. The main problem appears to be a breakdown in the relationship between the parents and the troubled teenager. The parents have often reached a point where they feel helpless and exhausted after trying to help their child. The parents are then frustrated when the social worker indicates that she cannot solve their teenager's problems but will assist them in finding a suitable way to deal with the problems which may take a period of time to solve.

Foster parents who are prepared to take troubled teenage children are difficult to find and these placements are often problematic because the

foster parents lack the commitment and perseverance to assist a teenager who has emotional, behavioural and social problems.

Responsibility: Social workers recognise the need to outline the responsibilities of the parents, as misunderstandings often occur when these are not made clear to the parents and the youth. The social worker may empathise with the parents' feelings of helplessness. Social workers who, due to a lack of skill, time or inability to define the boundaries of responsibilities, relieve the parents of their roles with regard to their teenagers and place themselves under unnecessary pressure to make decisions on behalf of the family. In doing this the social worker may negatively affect the parent/teenager relationship as mutual respect may be lost and alienation may occur due to feelings of failure and helplessness.

Schools: Social workers have to deal with schools in most cases of uncontrollable youths. There may be communication problems and a lack of understanding on the part of the principal of the wider effects and long term implications of expelling a pupil. These could be low self-esteem, dropping out of school, difficulty in gaining entrance to other educational institutions and reduced life opportunities in the future.

The office of the Minister of Welfare: Parents or relatives may report a case to the Minister of Welfare and Population Development because they disagree with the social worker's decision or feel the service is unprofessional. In some of these cases a ministerial inquiry is then opened. This places pressure on the social worker who has to attend panel meetings, prepare additional reports, deal with resistant parents and justify her decisions, as well as manage her own defensiveness. This has to be handled in addition to normal caseload demands.

Risk: The social worker often has to make decisions that may affect the safety and future of the adolescent and his or her family. This places additional pressure on the social worker to maintain her professional ideals, which are to always act in the best interest of her client and to give the most professional service within the framework of the welfare system in South Africa, making the best use of the resources that are available. The risks inherent in this type of work are that the teenager will be unhappy and become angry and rebellious, the parents may abandon their child or that the child may abscond or become involved in a negative peer group in the industrial school or childrens' home.

The group members appear to be able to make recommendations and decisions in spite of the risks mentioned above. On a personal level, they

appear to use a process of self-talk and rationalisation which enables them to cope with the stress and outcomes, empowering them to move on. They also rely on their colleagues who assist them in making decisions and enable them to express their feelings with regard to the successes and disappointments they encounter. The group members used the focus group as a forum to discuss their experiences of difficult cases as well as cases where positive progress was made in helping the troubled youth.

5.5 Recommendations made by the focus group members for the management of troubled youths

Several suggestions for improving services to troubled youths and their families, were made by the group members. These include:

- * the signing of a contract which sets out the roles, responsibilities and goals of the social worker, the youth and the parents
- * the establishment of a family therapy unit
- * the parents being required to attend parenting courses run by individual societies, such as the Systematic Training in Effective Parenting (STEP) course
- * the encouragement of the parents to attend specialized therapeutic groups, such as the parent training and support course run in association with the Department of Welfare in Pretoria and a

therapeutic programme for youths and parents run by an educational psychologist in Gauteng

- * the utilisation of resources in the community, such as safe houses run by professional foster parents, church groups or families who have a special empathy towards youth and who are prepared to take them into their homes for short term or long term placements
- * peer group counselling programmes in schools
- * the pooling of services such as specialised foster-parent training and screening.

The idea of societies working closer together to offer specialised services in the eastern region of Gauteng has been proposed by South African National Council for Child and Family Welfare. The group members have, however, not given serious consideration to this concept but have argued that the logistics of such a large scale amalgamation of services might prove difficult to negotiate and manage due to the distances clients and social workers would have to travel. This view indicates the group members have difficulty envisaging how they could change their present work methods and structures.

5.6 **Recommendations with regard to the attitudes of social workers**

The researcher makes the following recommendations for the management of social workers' attitudes towards working troubled youths and in the treatment of troubled youths:

5.6.1 **Team work:** The child and family welfare agencies of east Gauteng can explore teamwork and a pooling of resources and services to relieve the responsibility and pressure experienced by the social workers. An effective team has the advantages of team support and team identity. The team could include one or two social workers who have extensive experience with cases of uncontrollable teenagers. The group members do not appear to have given much thought to this strategy. Meetings could be arranged to discuss how to go about introducing a cooperative service and what the logistics of the organization would entail.

5.6.2 **Therapeutic programmes:** The utilisation of programmes aimed at maintaining the family system and effective parenting, thus helping the parents to cope with their teenage children. The parents and teenager will be asked to participate in the planning of treatment which may include attendance in a therapeutic programme. The following programmes will help to prevent a breakdown in family relationships:

- * ongoing STEP and STEP Teen programmes
- * the establishment of a family therapy unit
- * referral to a parent support programme for parents with uncontrollable children run by the Department of Welfare and Population Development
- * peer counselling programmes run in schools.

Mutual respect of adults for one another enables them to cooperate on behalf of the youth, and this should be part of the training exercise. The youth, by example, will develop respect for adults, self-respect and self-discipline. Training adolescents to serve other children or participate in programmes such as peer counselling enables youths to obtain and provide support, and also to learn from and model themselves on their peers.

5.6.3 In-service training for social workers: Training for the social workers should be ongoing to enable and empower them to improve their professional skills. Using an interactive style would enable them to incorporate their present knowledge and use the training to assist in their existing cases so that the training would be relevant and pertinent for the social workers. Training would be aimed at developing an understanding of the various modalities and approaches to learning and promoting an

understanding of the life circumstances and level at which the client operates. In this way a humane treatment of children and their families becomes an integral part of the ongoing education of social workers, encouraging a sensitivity and consideration of the needs of youths and the development of a sense of professional responsibility. On a preventative level they will acquire and improve their skills to run parenting courses, support groups and community projects, and on a therapeutic level will undertake family therapy. Training in racial and cultural issues creates social workers who personally understand the wounds resulting from discrimination, prejudiced services and a hostile environment. It is imperative that service personnel have a high non-discriminating perspective. Training on the theoretical paradigms such as the principals of systems theory is essential as this is the philosophy on which the techniques of family therapy are based. The benefits and merits of family therapy can be demonstrated to the social workers in role-playing scenarios. These will assist them to increase their skills and improve their capacity to manage cases of uncontrollable youths. Personnel training for all human service professionals must utilise the most recent research and modern techniques to ensure maximum competency and accountability to the community. Such training should also include a sensitivity to individual needs so that first-class services may be provided to youths and their families (White House Conference on Children 1970).

Training in specific techniques for handling cases of troubled youths will empower social workers and enhance professional and personal confidence. Drugs are a factor in many cases of troubled youths and strategies for dealing with drug abuse must form part of the social workers' in-service training.

- 5.6.4. **A support group for social workers:** Social workers would benefit from regular contact with other social workers dealing with troubled youths. A support group would be helpful in enabling them to share resources and ideas. Consulting colleagues was identified as a need in the focus groups, sharing experiences is a form of catharsis. This would also provide a forum for consultation and guidance in the present working environment where there are many changes and challenges. Personnel growth techniques such as cognitive restructuring exercises could be taught at these support groups. The use of visual imagery and positive thinking will enable the workers to question unrealistic and negative thought patterns, develop a positive-self image and learn to recognise their strengths and accept their limitations. Stress coping interventions at the work place can be introduced by the agencies as part of a staff support programme. The social workers would be able to identify the strengths of colleagues and use these in a cooperative way to improve the services provided.

5.6.5 The coordination and monitoring of services: Representatives from each agency providing services to uncontrollable youths and their families should meet on a regular basis to monitor the statistics. This will enable social workers to recognise trends and set standards for services to uncontrollable teenagers. The management of cases and the theoretical approaches employed in cases of troubled youths could be explored in order to provide more effective services. This group could also undertake the co-ordination, planning and sharing of the professional or specialist members of staff between agencies. Liaising with the Department of Welfare and Population Development on procedures and resources is essential to prevent misunderstandings and for the provision of the best possible service to youths.

5.6.6 Contracting with the parents and youth: The social workers working with troubled youths should meet to discuss the merits and implications of a contract drawn up with the parents and the youth setting out their goals and responsibilities and the nature of the services offered by the organisation. It must be shown that, in drawing up a contract with the client, the social worker is guided by the principles of justice and consultation at each stage.

5.6.7 Involving the parents and youth in decision making: Parents should be made aware there is very little choice in terms of the placement of their

teenage children in the child care system, and that, in many cases, these placements will not be in the child's best interest due to a lack of options. That is, there are often insufficient therapeutic services at these institutions, poor facilities and low educational standards. The importance of consultation with the youth and parents about their preferences and aims must not be overlooked if their participation and co-operation is required.

5.6.8 Dealing with problems experienced with residential facilities and

schools: Social workers in eastern Gauteng could undertake a study using participatory research to explore the problems experienced with industrial schools, children's homes and other schools in regard to troubled youths. These issues could be taken up with the Department of Education and the Department of Welfare and Population Development.

5.6.9 Setting out guidelines for procedures and ensuring children's rights are

upheld: The social workers should develop guidelines for legal and administrative procedures. They must acknowledge their responsibility to guarantee the youth's rights and ensure the youth is placed in a stable environment in order to avoid further emotional insecurity and irreparable

damage. Parents and all other adults who have a relationship with the youth must be educated and reminded of the rights which that youth has.

5.6.10 Encouraging the parents and youths to participate in support programmes: Efforts to involve troubled youths and families in support programmes should be intensified in order to minimise the need for separating the youth and parents.

5.6.11 Setting minimum standards: South African child and youth care system (1988): This document, produced by the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Young

People at Risk, provides general guidelines and procedures that should be followed in services to troubled youths. These guidelines apply at the levels of prevention, early intervention and statutory intervention, in foster care and residential care, with regard to management, safety, outcomes, programmed practices, standards and the developmental milieu and climate. Manuals such as these are helpful as they clarify requirements and procedures. The social workers should form a study group to establish how best to operationalise the recommendations made by the Department of Welfare and Population Development.

The above strategies are suggestions aimed at improving services in child and family welfare agencies. Each social worker is, however, personally responsible for her own professional advancement and growth. When she recognises and accepts this challenge and becomes actively involved in increasing her own knowledge and skills and those of her colleagues, she may enhance her feeling of competence and this will be reflected positively in her work.

5.7 Synopsis

Social workers play a pivotal role in ensuring teenagers' rights are respected. Should these rights be violated or should the life of an individual become intolerable he or she should have access to professional services and, if necessary, be able to live apart from his family in a safe environment. Conversely, should parents find they cannot cope with an irresponsible or totally uncooperative child, they are entitled to official services. The attitudes of social workers towards their teenage clients plays an important role in how they deal with troubled youths and their families, and how they cope with ever increasing cases where there is a need for intervention in cases of troubled youths.

The focus group discussions reveal that the group members do not feel they have adequate skills to provide effective therapeutic interventions to

troubled youths and their families. This was made clear by comments such as “we rely on basic counselling skills”, “we are a jack of all trades and master of none” and “personally I do not feel qualified to deal with substance abuse problems”. The group members do not feel qualified to prevent a breakdown of the family relationships through interventions to families themselves. They are not familiar with the newer paradigms of family therapy and other theories that promote improved internal and external family interactions. The group members recognise the need to improve the family’s relationships and communication with society at large, such as school, medical personnel and social welfare, as these have an impact on how they cope with transitions and solve their problems. It is the researcher’s bias that important techniques and approaches such as ecosystems theory, strategic and structural family therapy are useful therapeutic interventions for helping families who are experiencing problems with their teenagers. These are based on systems theory. Knowledge of these therapeutic techniques will empower social workers who presently rely on basic social work skills such as problem solving. Referral of cases to other organisations such as Famsa and the South African National Council for Alcohol and Drugs Abuse (Sanca) would suggest that the group members lack the confidence to undertake therapeutic interventions with families. The group members often appear to

accept the family's conclusion that the only solution to the problem is the removal of the problem youth.

The group members are concerned about the lack of suitable industrial schools and children's homes. Some children's homes have admission criteria which are not sensitive to individual youth's needs, for example, only short-term placements are accepted, i.e. for one year or less. Discipline in schools, industrial schools and children's homes is often ineffective due to shortages of staff and a lack of staff training. Therapeutic support systems and reconstruction services for the youth and the family are not adequate. These concerns highlight the fact that removing a teenager from his or her family is a risky business and not always in the youth's best interest.

The group members had mixed reactions to the pooling of the services of child and family welfare agencies in the eastern region of Gauteng. This idea has been put forward for investigation by the South African National Council for Child and Family Welfare. Group members have not given serious consideration to this concept, but pointed out that the logistics of such a large scale amalgamation might prove difficult to negotiate and manage. Social workers are expected by the Department of Welfare and Population Development to work at the preventative and early intervention levels. However, social workers have difficulty applying early intervention

strategies, such as running parenting and life skills courses and establishing support groups for parent and teenagers, due to a general apathy on the part of the clients and lack of support from the schools. Although the group members do recognise the importance of preventative programmes, only one agency is running a STEP course, while another has launched a pilot peer counselling programme. These programmes run more effectively in the larger child welfare agencies where there are more professional staff to run courses out of normal working hours and a larger caseload from which to draw participants. This supports the concept of the pooling of resources, where the smaller agencies would be able to refer clients and the larger agencies would have more candidates for the courses they run.

The group members are judgmental of the parents and the welfare system in South Africa. The analysis of the discussions indicates the group members have a negative attitude to their work (based on 39 positive and 55 negative comments). They feel frustrated and ill-equipped to deal with troubled youths. As a social worker, one frequently encounters feelings of powerlessness due to inadequate training and/or education which can lead to burnout (Van der Walt 1993).

The group members spoke freely about their attitudes towards their work with troubled youths. They had a need to express their concerns, and share

with and consult group members about their experiences of the cases they were involved in. The group members easily became involved in the discussion and indicated their own concerns about this particular field of service. It appears that supervision is done in an informal way at most agencies which may not be adequate, as shown by the group members' negative attitudes and lack of confidence.

The social workers tended to blame the parents for their lack of cooperation in solving the problems experienced by the youth. The researcher feels that the parents generally feel helpless, powerless and exhausted in their efforts to solve their problems. Family therapy would be a helpful approach in assisting the parents to change their perspective, enabling them to look at the problem in a new light and to move forward. An appropriate family therapy unit which includes a therapy room and an observation room divided by a one way mirror with sound and recording equipment and an experienced team of family therapists will be necessary to provide this kind of service.

5.8 **End note**

A great many troubled teenagers are in a difficult situation in South Africa where they are beyond effective containment and control by their parents and welfare services are not easily accessible or effective. They are often

subject to interrupted schooling and face poor employment prospects. These teenagers are being poorly prepared for responsible adult life. Under these circumstances, the production of youths with poor prospects is almost inevitable. In order for this situation to change appreciably, progress must be made on problems at both the education and employment levels. An important adjunct would be the development of a more satisfactory 'teenage culture', supported by organisations such as child and family welfare societies which are directed to meet the needs of teenagers experiencing problems.

The information in the literature study and the data collected from two focus groups indicate work with troubled teenagers and their families is a demanding and specialised area of social work services. The focus group members generally viewed their impact negatively or regarded themselves as inadequate for the task. The social workers' knowledge and skills are directly related to the standard of service they deliver to their clients. The social worker is the most essential and valuable element in social work practice; she must know herself, her strengths and weaknesses, and she must be aware of her own attitudes, values and feelings about herself and her clients. A lack of confidence in one's ability to provide an effective service leads to feelings of negativity and helplessness. The social workers have to assess themselves: they should explore their attitudes, beliefs and

123.

values, as well as the nature of the service they are providing as a point of departure to improving the services in the youth care system.

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APPENDIX 1

1. What does adolescence mean?
2. Where do my ideas and attitudes come from?
3. What do I think about my own adolescence?
4. How do I feel about the adolescents I know?
5. How confident do I feel in my work with adolescents?
6. Does the agency I work for have set procedures that determine the nature of interventions with troubled youths?
7. Are the troubled teenagers and their families dealt with as individuals or as an interrelated system?
8. Is a team approach employed, involving regular consultation with a supervisor or colleagues?
9. Do I feel that I have a wide enough knowledge of the theory and techniques to provide effective counselling to youths and families?
10. Are systemic family therapy techniques employed?
11. Are there sufficient resources for troubled teenagers in South Africa?
12. What preventative strategies do I employ before opening a Children's Court enquiry?
13. Do I have a feeling of having failed professionally if I open a Children's Court enquiry?
14. Do the institutions selected for the children meet their particular needs? Are there other choices if the institutions do not meet their needs?

15. What feasible recommendation for change to the services for troubled youths can be made?

APPENDIX II

1. How can we change and improve our services?
2. The suggestion has been made that we need to work with the whole family. Do we have the skills to do this, however?
3. It is evident that we are seeing more complicated family problems involving adolescents which often includes abuse of substances by the adolescent or by the parent(s)? Do we feel qualified to deal with these problems?
4. Do we want to keep families together?
5. How can we become more involved in preventative strategies?
6. The National Council for Child and Family Welfare is investigating a pooled service in east Gauteng. What is your view of a collective service? How do you see your own contribution to this?