People become clients of social work agencies by following a complex route, metaphorical or actual, through other attempts to help. This constructs the nature of the social work interaction. In community care services, routes to clienthood may become more complex with a wider variety of agencies being involved in a single person’s case; social workers will have to be the guide through this network.

Clienthood is best understood as a process through which clients become aware of issues, are impelled and sometimes compelled to obtain services, follow various options, come to see an agency as relevant, make contact, are taken into it and processed. They occupy different positions as clients throughout their contact, before ceasing to be clients. Assessment of routes to clienthood should include their importance to the relationship, the complexity of the route and factors which affect the client arising from the route taken. Practice implications include the value of clients’ understanding the route to clienthood, how it has affected them, and the continuing path they must take, the nature of the intended clienthood and its effects on other people and agencies and understanding of the colleague-client balance.

People with problems do not immediately think of going to a social worker. When a client comes to a social worker, they have usually been somewhere else. The ‘somewhere else’ may be metaphorical in the sense that they may have gone over various alternatives in their minds. Or it may be actual in the sense that clients may have followed a lengthy and circuitous pathway to reach the point at which they begin to receive the attentions of this particular social worker. I argue that clienthood is not easily understood as a state which clients occupy for a period of contact with an agency. Rather, it is a process of definition and re-definition through which they pass in different phases of contact with the agency. This conception of clienthood draws attention to continuing problems in being a client during contact with an agency which can be disempowering for a client, and of which workers should be aware.

The route to clienthood is an important aspect of how a social worker deals with a client both initially and over a longer period. This is so for reasons of good practice, and for reasons of current policy and social services organisation. It is those reasons which I explore in this introductory section. Following sections examine what clienthood means and various practical implications of understanding more clearly someone’s route to clienthood.

Thinking about clienthood is a valuable part of any assessment of clients in the early stages of their contacts with agencies, and may usefully be borne in mind as they progress through the process of clienthood within the agency. The primary practical reason for being concerned about someone’s route to clienthood is that in many ways this defines the nature of the social work that may be undertaken with that client. Social workers usually exercise considerable power or influence in interactions with their clients, since they are the professionals with expertise in interacting, and their position as an official with the agency and their middle-class status give them a starting position of dominance. This may change for several reasons. For one thing, it may be consciously given up or played down to encourage clients to interact on a more equal basis, or as a matter
of principle.

Clients have means of resisting workers' dominance, and reasons for doing so. They can restrict the amount of information given to the worker or the areas of their life that they are prepared to offer for work. They can avoid, ignore or refuse, gently or otherwise, knowingly or not, contact with the worker or engagement in some objective or activity. More positively, they can direct the work in one direction or another. Their reasons for doing so may include suspicion or reticence about just the things which may help the worker to dominance: class, race, sex, and other social differences, official power and knowledge. Other reasons may include their definition of the issues that they want help with.

Clients' ways of resisting workers' power in their relationships affects the possibility of doing social work at all. More important, it forms the nature of the social work done. Where clients want to go and how they want to travel there affects what is done and how.

What clients want is defined by their route to clienthood. The definition of problem, the social pressures, sometimes official compulsion or the forcible intervention of an agency in their lives, the route to the agency and options which were closed off on that route which led to the selection of this particular agency; all these may arise from general social perceptions about a problem and the agencies available. Wikler's research (1986) into the pathways to help followed by Jewish clients in New York confirms that self-referral and referral from non-professionals was by far the most significant route. So, typically, when someone has problems, they cast around for ways of dealing with them on their own, or with family and friends. What they have tried cuts off future options. Advice and comments from friends, the places that they go; all these form how they see the next place that they go for help. What that agency does and what its staff think about colleagues in other agencies and their picture of the field colour where the client will be passed to. The length and complexity of a route to an agency constructs the client's side of the interaction and sets that interaction on a pathway which will be hard for the social worker to change.

Each individual interaction, then, is socially constructed by the experiences of the clients and the expectations of the members of the public around the client and the social role and expectations of other agencies through whose hands the client has passed. The mass of clients constantly circulating among agencies tends to create a more generalised social construction of an agency. The strength of this construction makes it important for social workers to understand and work with the conceptions that clients may have of their role and functions.

There is also a reason for concern about these issues which lies in the current situation in the UK social services. The creation of a contract/provider split in community care services and the growth of small, often specialised, private and voluntary agencies means that pathways to clienthood will be more complex than when there are a limited number of large government agencies. One of the roles of social workers and case managers will be to guide people through those pathways appropriately. Also, clients of one agency may be passed to another for a particular purpose while still remaining clients of the first agency. Complex networks of clienthood will grow
up as a result.

So I argue that in practice, social workers will be able to work with clients more effectively if they take a concern for clients' routes to their agency. As well as this, the different kinds of clienthood that someone will experience while receiving services from an agency, and how they understand the route onward from the agency will affect the effectiveness of the service that they receive.

The fragmentation and specialisation of agencies and their functions arising from recent community care legislation in the National Health Service and Community Care Act, 1990, make this a valuable skill applied to a useful service to clients in helping them find pathways to the services they need. Instead of the typical client in later life receiving social work, home help, mobile meals and day care all from the social services department, they will often receive these from a variety of different agencies, in different sectors. The worker and the client will have to come to terms with the relationships between these agencies, and the fact that they have different rationales for services. For instance, a client may have difficulty in accepting a voluntary agency that they may see as offering 'charity', and prefer a commercial service for which they can pay and be treated as a customer. Others may prefer to see the service as a right, and resent the replacement of an official agency with a private-sector one. When a client needs to progress from this complex of services into residential care, they may again change sectors; there may also be difficulties about delivering an accustomed service (such as a valued GP, or a continuing physiotherapy service) into a private residential care home where public services are not allowed to go, or are discouraged by the management of the home.

The question is how to understand and work with our understanding of routes to clienthood, and see how clienthood changes as people progress through this increasingly complex mix of services.

WHAT IS CLIENTHOOD?

If there is something called a client, there must also be a state of clienthood. So, there must be a state of not being a client. When and how does someone become or cease to be a client?

Another related question is the variety of states which we might subsume under the heading of 'client'. It has been the custom for social workers to call the people to whom they offer services 'clients', but the same people may at the same time be 'patients' to workers in the health service whom social workers co-operate with. 'Patient' has sometimes been seen as a usage implying rather less autonomy that 'client', but some agencies (particularly in day care) refer to their 'clients' as 'users', perhaps with the implication that they should not see themselves obliged or forced into a particular regime. Other agencies might prefer to call their clients 'customers', to emphasise a 'purchasing of service' relationship which might be thought to place someone receiving service more in control of services offered to them, by having the right to cease to buy the services. Recent research with older people suggests that the rhetoric of participation reflects only a capacity to refuse rather than change what is offered and in many settings is still largely non-existent (Allen et al., 1992). It should be noted also that the purchaser-provider split originates from the ideas of the Griffiths
Report (1988), which moves in this direction not to increase client autonomy and control (like the concurrent Wagner Report - NISW, 1988), but rather as a means of reducing local authority dominance of the provision of social services and of controlling expenditure.

The value of the term ‘client’ is therefore dubious, but it is widely accepted for its purpose, and is more suitable than many possible alternatives (Payne, 1983). So I have used it here to cover all of the types of relationship which social workers have with the people to whom they provide services. This discussion draws attention, however, to the importance of considering what the relationship with the ‘client’ actually is, what shades of difference exist between different states of clienthood, and especially whether different terminology such as ‘patient’, ‘user’, and ‘customer’ reflect real differences, which must be reflected in practice.

People become defined as clients when they engage in social work. Sometimes the status of client is only temporary and applies only when the client is actually meeting with a worker. This might be so where someone makes a single visit to an agency for advice or help. Client status may exist for longer than this because more extended help usually leads to registration by the agency as a client. They are a client of the agency for the period of help even though they are not engaged in social work for most of it.

Not everyone in contact with social workers is a client. Some may be colleagues in other agencies. At one time the distinction between client and colleague relationships was clear: clients were helped and colleagues were co-operators in helping. More modern convention is to see the client as a participant and colleague in the process of helping, and the implication is that this is less paternal or maternal and more empowering for the client, leading to a greater degree of independence or influence on the course of the work undertaken. Also, social workers may work by advocating the client's interests, or act as the colleague of a client in responding to others in the agency or elsewhere. The colleague in the other agency is then the object of recognised social work techniques such as advocacy or liaison. A distinction must be drawn between techniques aimed at direct behaviour change of a client and those which are concerned with acting on behalf of a client, but they are all social work techniques.

Some people involved with social workers have an ambivalent status. Foster parents of children in care are usually regarded as colleagues of the worker, but many techniques used in working with them are similar to those used in working with clients. In this case, the difference is that the foster parent is acting on behalf of the agency rather than being the object of its help. The support offered, while similar to that offered to clients, furthers the work of the agency rather than simply aiming to help.

A more complex example still is the parent of an adult with learning difficulties. The parent may be treated as a colleague with whom the worker is co-operating to help the client. Alternatively, both parent and client may be part of a whole family which is seen as the client. Yet again, the parent may be treated as a client in their own right in order to deal with the stress in coping with a handicapped family member. Frequently, a mixture of two or three of these approaches would be used.
Another ambiguous situation arises where a worker acts on behalf of an agency to investigate or justify an official or formal action. For example, under guardian ad litem legislation, children who are to be adopted have an independent investigation. The primary role of a worker acting as guardian is to offer advice to the court making the adoption order about what is in the child's best interests. In this instance the social worker deals with the child as though they were a client but is not the primary person with responsibility for providing them with services (although some benefit may be gained by going through the process, particularly if it is, as expected by the legislation, child-centred and therefore cognisant and promoting of the child's best interests).

Formal recognition of client status may persist beyond any episodes of services provided by the agency. Other agencies may record the worker's involvement. Even where contact has ceased, the other agency may regard someone as an actual or potential client of the worker, and may assume that they can call upon the worker if they have a problem. Occasionally, clients may see themselves as such although the worker does not. One reason for the persistence of client status is that clienthood relates both to the agency and the worker; a client may feel attached to the worker or the agency, or may be seen as attached by others or by the worker or agency.

This process may go further. Clienthood may be extended from an individual who is a client to their family or social group. If a mother becomes a client, the worker or agency may assume a responsibility for all their children and Spouse. Also some categories of people or groups in the community may be seen as clients or potential clients. Prisoners released on parole are subject to supervision by a probation officer and thus become clients automatically. People living in a community subject to the attentions of a community worker may be regarded as that worker's clients, particularly if the work is done through an advice service. Other agencies may automatically regard a problematic resident of the area as an actual or potential client of that worker. Even if they did not use that term they would still regard them as all the objects of or benefiting from their efforts. Patients in a hospital might all be regarded by ward nursing staff as clients of the social worker responsible for their wards even though they received no service.

To go even further, in some cases whole populations or types of people may come to be regarded as the sort of people who are likely to become or are similar to clients of social workers. People living in an area of stigmatised housing or who are poor, or mentally handicapped or elderly might all be seen by others as legitimately clients of social workers, or 'the sort of people' who are clients of social workers.

This discussion shows that the status of 'client' can be very complex and uncertain. I have outlined one way in which we may understand how clients become socially defined as such, by looking at how they are defined and by whom at any one time. Such definitions may be not of a particular person, but of classes of people. They may be seen as actual or potential clients.

THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A CLIENT

The complexity of understanding clienthood as a status suggests that an alternative view might bear fruit. This second, process, view
looks at the journey over time from not being a client through the process of becoming one and finally to being accepted, at least in some environments, as one. Again, who, and which agency, at particular times, acceptance, perhaps, record in a formal way) someone's clienthood is important.

The first point in the process of becoming clients is arriving at an awareness of circumstances in their lives. Such awareness may be self-induced or presented to the client by others. At some point, simultaneously or later, the circumstances become associated with forces which motivate the client to take action about them.

One of the most common forms of impulsion is seeing the circumstances as a problem; that is, something that is wrong and needing amendment in ways which cannot immediately be identified or acted upon. Faced with a problem, people look for ways of resolving it. Other common impulsions come from emotional pressures in relationships, when people around the potential client create circumstances which apply pressure to act. Consequences are also an important factor. People may become impelled to act if they come to expect adverse economic or social consequences in their lives if circumstances do not change. Some impulsions arise from outside the potential client; where they are compelled to engage in contact with an agency by legal or official means.

Assuming the impulsion to act is strong enough, clients take up one or more options for action from their knowledge about ways to act. The option chosen may be habitual, rationally thought out or an unconsidered thrust in the dark. For example, clients with debt problems are often unaware of the build-up of circumstances which will lead to difficult consequences, and may be motivated by unclear anxieties about their general situation. They may not move until a particular debt gains significance, perhaps because a creditor presses them for payment. The nature of this debt among, perhaps, many others may then define the direction in which they seek help. Being behind in paying the rent could bring them to an agency specialising in housing matters. Running out of food for the children could push them towards a family advice agency. Each of these agencies, while perhaps recognising the range of problems, may tend to define the circumstances which are relevant to them differently.

By these processes, a social work agency comes into the client's awareness and, from knowledge gained about it, comes to be seen as relevant to the present circumstances and the impulsion. There is often a route to the agency, through which additional knowledge is gained, or options closed off. So, for example, a prostitute is arrested by the police, and advised to seek financial help for her family to reduce the likelihood that she will continue in her lifestyle. If she took up this option, she might end up with a social security, family advice or welfare rights agency. Continuing on her path as a prostitute, however, might eventually lead to court, where she might be referred to the probation service. Alternatively, leaving her children alone while working might lead to her referral to a child protection agency.

Then begins the process of intake. The aim is to explore clients' circumstances and establish a definition of them as relevant to the agency, including, often, an assessment of their motivation. Specht and Specht (1986a) see the point at which assessment begins as the beginning of the route to clienthood, although I think they pitch
this at too late a stage in the process I have outlined here. Certainly at this stage clienthood is not final. People are often described as 'applicants' being investigated to see whether they may fall within the definition of a client suitable to the agency according to the agency's policies, the training and social institutions which form the social worker's view of appropriateness, and professional, personal, public and political trends. Some services such as welfare rights advice may be offered without a caller being defined as a client.

All this assumes that visiting the agency is a matter of choice, but in fact many clients are involuntary, and are forced to visit the agency court order, or by being investigated through one of the agency's policing functions such as an investigation for child abuse or neglect. Cingolani (1984) argues that workers should see themselves as in a process of continual negotiation of an acceptable relationship with clients. She proposes that a social conflict model in which roles are taken by the social worker to mediate and negotiate between an unwilling client and the social environment may be most appropriate.

Specht and Specht argue (1986b) that making a contract with the client for providing service is the final stage in establishing the definition of clienthood. Here again, I think they misjudge the process, because after intake and designation as a client, the status of clients may change, as they are passed to different parts of a large agency for different forms of help, or as their own, community, family and other agencies' perceptions change as it becomes known that they are receiving services - client leads also to the process of ceasing to be a client. This, again, involves recognising circumstances which lead to an impulsion - this time away from the agency. Understanding when it is appropriate to stop involvement with an agency is also an important factor. In any of these moves, clients are again affected by their own social understanding, the agency's or worker's influence or compulsion, information gained from the worker, legal pressures, and knowledge and attitudes deriving from the client's social circle.

By combining, in our understanding of clienthood, both 'process' and 'status' we can see that although in many cases for an agency any particular person's clienthood is transitory (although at least some clients seem to go on and on), it is not an immutable state but a constantly changing set of roles, involving a complex interaction with the agency and other players in the community and related agencies.

ASSESSING CLIENTHOOD

The complexity of clienthood suggests that we should assess it carefully, take notice of it and include it as an aspect of our understanding of and work with clients. There are fundamentally three aspects of clienthood that we can usefully assess

1. the importance of its effect on our work with a particular client;
2. its complexity; affected the client in going through the
3. the factors which have a clienthood process;

and I shall look briefly at these in turn.
Importance

I have argued that the route to clienthood may be important because of the client's influence on the process of social work. The extent of the client's capacity to control or depart from the social worker's intended activity depends to some extent on the perceptions of what the work is about gained from the route to being a client at this particular agency. So, looking at who has referred the client, and who has moulded their view of what the agency or social worker can provide may empower or disempower the client from accepting the social worker's help, or may induce resistance. For example, a child who has been told that the social worker has power to take them away from home if they do not behave according to a parent's wishes, may resist treating the social worker with confidence and trust. This will be more or less important depending on a client's capacity to create that control and how important that is to the worker. In some cases, their influence on the process might be relatively slight, or unthought-out. A child, for example, might react very strongly on a fairly instinctual basis to what a social worker is doing or saying. From one point of view, this may make the child's reaction less important than that of an adult whose perhaps more reasoned reaction should be more carefully dealt with. However, a child's less worked-out reaction may nonetheless be powerful in affecting how the social worker is able to act; indeed the unreasoned may be more powerful than the understood. So, clients' capacities to control an interaction with a social worker varies, but even slight or unconsidered reactions stimulated from the route to clienthood may be powerful.

Complexity

The complexity of the route to clienthood also needs assessment in order to judge how it will affect the work to be undertaken. People who have tried many different alternatives, failed to find suitable help, visited many agencies without success and are still seeking something as yet undefined may be subject to more confused messages than someone who knows that the agency provides what they want and have come straight there. A complex route to clienthood may have faced potential clients with disappointment, conflict or a sense of inadequacy because they have not been able to take advantage of help which has been offered. Their attitude to the agency may be coloured by what they have heard. They may not have come to the agency before because they have heard unfavourable things. Or they may expect more of the same lack of success which they have experienced from similar agencies. Alternatively, they may have come with a picture of the agency as the answer to all their problems. The more complex their journey, the more likely they are to have had some sort of message about the agency, and the more likely it is that the message may have been contradicted or confused by information from different sources.

It is important to remember that the route to clienthood may have been a metaphorical journey, undertaken in the clients mind, by examining and rejecting other options. The problem with this process may be that the client has not made appropriate decisions, because of wrong or inadequate information or because their judgements are affected by their perceptions or feelings about some of the options available to them. For example, a older woman may prefer to call at the office of the home help organiser because she fears that visiting
a social worker will lead to pressure for admission to residential care.

Factors affecting the client

Becoming a client is a process which affects how the client responds to social work help. Most people, for example, resent compulsion to come for help, whether it is imposed by the court or by their mother. Others may be relieved by the removal of responsibility. Negotiation around the roles to be taken and the degree of freedom and control to be exercised by client and social worker helps to establish clarity in the work.

Compulsion, however, is only the most obvious example of the need to discover the nature of the impulsion which has led the client to the agency, which often affects the way they will respond to help. It is often useful, therefore, to try to define what factors have impelled the client into contact with the agency, and such matters as whether they are emotional pressures coming from the client's own feelings, or pressures from others, whether the impulsion for contact comes from official or informal advice. The expectations that clients or others have of the agency can also usefully be explored.

Other factors affecting the client may include physical pain or mental distress or incapacity such as feelings of guilt or inadequacy which limit or change the way they can go through the process of becoming a client. How they are received, questioned, whether forms are made out, whether they had to wait, whether we are visiting or they are calling at the office; all these sorts of things may also affect their reactions.

SOME PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

This section is intended to draw attention to some of the practice implications of a concern for the route that clients have taken to our agency. I argue that it is important always to have an awareness of the client's route to clienthood as we receive them, and the fact that their status as a client with the agency is always changing. Moreover, the social worker is often a part of a still continuing route to clienthood elsewhere, and I argue that we should be aware of our part in that route and take care of its consequences in our work.

We have seen that it is important in the first instance to assess what route the client has followed to our agency, including the metaphorical route, its importance to us and the client in our work, its complexity and any factors around becoming a client in our agency which may have affected the client. We may need to investigate the construction that the client holds of the agency and of ourselves.

The client may need help in understanding the path that they have followed, by an analysis of the options that they have rejected, or of their improving understanding of the situation they are in. For example, the mother with debt problems can see the pathway she has followed as a series of failed attempts to deal with her problems, whereas they may arise from a limited understanding of her whole situation. She is not just a person with a threat of eviction hanging over her head, whose request for help has been rejected by the housing department, and who has been told that the DSS cannot help her. Rather, she has explored certain options, and may need to explore the extent of her other debts and the pressures on and needs
of her family in a broader way before she can begin to resolve this particular issue.

Equally, it may be that the client must be referred elsewhere. This action should be taken with an awareness of the path already taken. The agency to which a client must be referred may be new to her, in which case some explanation and help to become a client there may be necessary. Alternatively, it may already have been experienced and current dislike or anxiety about the new agency should be explored. Clients may need guidance about the way to approach another agency, and help in returning if the approach is unsuccessful.

We need to consider how explicit we should be in dealing with a pathway. A client may present us with the impression that she has trailed from one place to the other, and this may require a good deal of consideration of what has or has not been achieved as a result. Others may be more anxious to get on with what they have come for. Similarly, some clients may need to be made clearly aware of changes in their status as clients as they progress through the agency. If referral to the home help service means that a client cannot expect a regular visit from the social worker that they have become accustomed to they should be made aware of this and of ways to call for the social worker's help in the future, and circumstances in which this is appropriate.

Clients may also need to be aware of the extent to which their involvement in the agency is considered to be temporary or relatively long-term, and this may also be necessary in dealing with other agencies, too. I have sometimes been approached by an agency thinking that because of a contact some time ago a client was still on the books', and it is better that clients should not be stigmatised in this way, or other agencies lulled into a false sense of security that a problem is being dealt with, when work on the case has ceased. The persistence of client roles with other agencies, and the possible stigmas that they bring should be dealt with, when work on the case has ceased. The colleague/client balance in our relationships with clients. They should be clearly aware when they are being treated as co-workers on a case, as foster parents or as co-operative members of a family working jointly with a worker on a problem, and when the balance changes. We might say something like:

In this interview, I think it would be helpful to concentrate on the difficulties you are having with your husband and see if I can help with these, rather than on your son's problems at school.

This draws attention plainly but positively to a change in client status. We also need to be aware in our work of the variety of client roles that an individual may have. They may be a client in more than one agency, for example, with differing expectations and assumptions, and a client may bring assumptions to our work from another agency which may be inappropriate. Equally, within the agency, they may be expected to behave differently in different client situations. A child in care, for example, may be expected to behave differently with their field social worker than with residential care staff, and
The implications of this may be usefully explored on occasions.

ENDWORD

The purpose of this paper has been to draw attention to the concept of the route to clienthood, and to suggest that this should be seen as a process which does not end at acceptance into work with an agency, but continues as a route through clienthood while the client is in contact with the agency. These ideas are important because clients' understanding of the agency forms how they react to the agency's work and in many ways construct that work. I have suggested that all workers should be aware of the issue of clienthood as they enter and continue work with clients, and that an awareness of pathways will enhance the clarity and acceptability of their work with clients. Some practice implications and examples of the issues draw out the importance of differing client perceptions.

Acknowledgement

This paper derives from some points briefly stated in the author's Modern Social Work Theory (Macmillan, 1991)

References


