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Creating space to think and feel – Reflections on teaching, learning and practice in social work, with insights from social pedagogy

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Abstract

The stories and identities of people who use social work services are often obscured by mass media stereotypes and labels – 'failed asylum seekers', 'scroungers', 'troubled families'. The influence of managerialism compounds this problem, with space for thinking and feeling continually under pressure. This practice paper draws on ideas from social pedagogy to reflect on the benefits of a creative attempt to connect heads and hearts in the academy. Informed by an approach used with nursing students in Australia, social work undergraduates in London (England) were encouraged to engage with a range of creative media (newspapers, films, television, plays, social media) and journal about what they noticed. Drawing on narrative ideas, students reflected on portrayals of people that were 'thin' – labelling and oppressive – and 'thick' – revealing a richer picture of people's lives, needs and capabilities. After putting together short stories or accounts of their own, based on their journaling, students were invited to share these in a type of 'reflecting team' with peers. This process invited students to develop critical and ethical perspectives through thinking about what had struck them, what they had understood differently about the service user groups, what resonated with them personally, and how this might affect their practice. This small example of creative practice is considered as part of a wider reflection on the value of a rich curriculum for social work education, holding out hope for humane practice in challenging times.

Keywords: social work; social pedagogy; narrative; creativity; education; ethics; reflection; hope

Creating space to think and feel – Reflections on teaching, learning and practice in social work, with insights from social pedagogy

1

Introduction

At a time when the benefits of general practitioners prescribing art classes are being taken seriously (Redmond et al., 2018), creativity and the arts can still feel like an uncomfortable fit with social work. The polarising debates about social work as either art or science (Cornish, 2017) are perhaps one reason, but there is also the issue of what social work represents in society. The people social work serves are still often regarded as somehow less than human.

Stigmatising and limiting discourses about people who might use social work services saturate the media and surface in practice policies and procedures (Fenton, 2016), casting people as 'troubled', 'challenging', 'mad', 'risky', 'illegal' and so on (Harragan et al., 2018; Wills et al., 2016). Such 'thin' stories (Morrison, 2009) denigrate and – as recently admitted in a government document – 'obscure' the identities and capabilities of real people (MHCLG, 2019, p. 6). Social work as a profession also suffers from stigma and blame, amplified through often hostile media reporting (Warner, 2014).

Some rare and welcome positive media coverage about social workers included a collection of short pieces written by people for whom their involvement was life changing (Hardy, 2015). The stories included reflections on a range of things, from major decisions to small gestures. One recalled the receiving of framed copies of lost GCSE certificates, something small but important enough to remember. That the social worker in this instance noticed the significance of the missing certificates, for a young person who had been moved many times, implies a depth of relationship and professional understanding. To track the certificates down and have them framed could be described as a creative act – one that perhaps recognises the memories, hopes or capabilities of the young person involved. It also suggests deep care (Emond, 2016). 'Going the extra mile' is not unusual in social work. However, there is much about the structure, systems and narratives surrounding the profession that discourages the flourishing of creative and humane practice.

The overriding emphasis on bureaucracy, targets and performance over the last thirty to forty years (managerialism) has shackled the statutory social work role (Rogowski, 2018). Although sympathetic to such critique, Beckett (2014) has challenged the tendency to imagine halcyon days in social work, and to uncritically assume that everything about managerialism has been detrimental. However, a sustained and developed critique has highlighted the constraints that this approach to social work has placed on practice that is ethical (Banks, 2014), relational (Ruch, 2012) and helpful to people (Petrie, 2010).

The asset-stripping impact of austerity (Lavalette, 2017) has exacerbated the negative impacts of managerialism. Despite the introduction of a potentially liberating approach to social work with adults, heralded by England's Care Act 2014 (Whittington, 2016a, 2016b), there is less capacity for support within communities (and for practitioners) when more is needed, undermining relationships (Shennan, 2017). In social work with children, based on ethnographic research, Ferguson (2017) not only acknowledged meeting much good practice, but also discussed the 'invisible child'. Children in this analysis are seen but not seen, because of the paralysing effects of anxiety on practitioners needing more support to think, feel and make sense of what they encounter.

This paper focuses on practice in social work education in England, with a mind on the practice of future social workers. Reflection on teaching and learning with social work students, drawing on narrative ideas (Morrison, 2009), is offered as an example of creative and hopeful practice. Connections between social pedagogy and creativity, picked up on in this special issue, provide an enriching wider perspective. Some synergy is found in the theoretical and practice perspectives considered throughout, but this is not to suggest that they can or should be integrated. As Houston (2012, p. 653) has argued, 'social life is complex and requires a wide lens that can refract light in different directions on contrasting subject matters.'

The need for space to think and feel

People want to become social workers for a variety of reasons, but the impulse to help ranks high, including motivation from personal experiences of helping or being helped (Stevens et al., 2012). Stevens et al. (2012) have contrasted this desire to help with the realities of practice, positing a link with the high levels of burnout and stress in the profession. Social work students need a developing critical

awareness of the challenges, limitations and shortcomings within the profession, and those that impact from outside. At the same time, there is a need to weave different spaces and threads into the curriculum. Future practitioners need to explore what ethical, hopeful and empathic practice might look like, and ways of getting there (Collins, 2015; Higgins, 2016).

The value of a rich curriculum for social work education emerges from a range of perspectives. For example, the benefits of creativity (Jackson and Burgess, 2005) and social pedagogical perspectives (Hatton, 2013; Charfe and Gardner, 2019); meaningful involvement and inclusion of people who have used services (Askheim et al., 2017; Hatton, 2017); research mindedness and openness to ideas about social work from other countries (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014); and working with relationships (Ruch et al., 2018). Such perspectives provide a contrast to the influential argument that social work education should be narrowly focused on the technical proficiency of graduates (Narey, 2014). Social workers need a mix of knowledge, skills and capabilities. However, when these are too reductively defined, there is limited space for the development of a more dynamic ethical perspective (Banks, 2016).

Social work students are required to demonstrate their competence and capability based on a wide range of standards (BASW, 2017; DfE, 2014; DoH, 2015). All these documents include some content on ethics and, either implicitly or explicitly, on social work values. In assignments, students also frequently refer to the Code of Ethics, published by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2014). However, there is a gap between knowing the codes and everyday practice that is ethical (Banks, 2016).

Houston (2012, p. 656) has acknowledged the potential for thinking about virtue ethics in social work, for asking 'what kind of social worker should I be' rather than 'what should I do'. Being able to think about this would mean paying attention to character in social work education (Holmström, 2014). Students need support to develop and integrate an ethical stance, rather than just knowledge about ethics. This requires empathy, and recognition of others as human beings, rather than objects requiring help. Banks (2016) has acknowledged, among other strands, the emotional and relational aspects of day-to-day ethics work.

These ideas connect in some ways with the social pedagogical concept of *Haltung*. This is an attitude or mindset that cannot be transported or easily articulated. It emerges from embedded thinking about the 'how' rather than the 'what' of working with people (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012, p. 5). Casting further light, Eichsteller (2010) has explained that social pedagogical *Haltung* is based on 'an emotional connectedness to other people and a profound respect for their human dignity'. This concept is returned to later in the paper to reflect on the work described below.

Creating space to think and feel

Social work education affords a window in which students prepare for practice but during which they also experience an ethos. In my course, we have been exploring ways not only of holding on to what might be regarded as traditional social work values, including commitment to social justice, but also of thinking about relational and humane practice. An important part of this is co-producing teaching and learning with people who use services, and then students' work and learning with people in practice placements. Alongside this, other creative and reflective spaces in the curriculum can help students develop empathy (Grant, 2014) and a feel for ethical practice (Banks, 2014) in their learning together (Kirkendall and Krishen, 2015).

The use of stories offers a range of creative ways of thinking about and working with people (Drumm, 2013; Fairburn, 2002; Gold, 2012). Voronka (2019) has highlighted the danger that stories told by (and about) people who have used services can be used in limiting ways, such as recovery narratives being used to justify cuts in mental health services. In the example considered here, students were encouraged to critically consider not only the creative potential of narratives, but also their capacity to limit and obscure.

Paul Morrison's work with nursing students in Australia, clearly outlined in his paper (Morrison, 2009), forms the basis of the process I describe here. Morrison's work is rooted in a range of practices associated with narrative therapy. Broader narrative ideas have had an increasing influence across a number of academic and practice-based disciplines in recent years, albeit at a slower pace in social work (Roscoe et al., 2011; Wilks, 2005). Moreover, an attempt has been made to argue for 'constructive social

Creating space to think and feel – Reflections on teaching, learning and practice in social work, with insights from social pedagogy

3

work' as an overarching framework for practice (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000), drawing on postmodern and social constructionist ideas that also inform narrative therapy. However, in social work (and social pedagogy (Kemp, 2011)) some of these underpinning ideas inform aspects of practice but are not dominant.

Narrative therapy practices are underpinned by a social constructionist view of the self as fluid, rather than static (Houston, 2015). With a narrative therapy lens, people are not defined by the problems they are experiencing, nor do these problems reside within them. Instead, there are multiple stories that carry power. Stories are self-told, told by or with others, and there are also bigger stories, or dominant discourses, that shape people's lives (Morgan, 2000). Weaved around events in a person's life, stories assemble into a 'dominant plot', but within this, some stories have been missed, 'remain untold', and others are imbued with particular significance (Fleming, 2003, p. 180). Critically, stories can be 'reauthored', 'thin' can become 'thick', and new possibilities, meanings and outcomes can emerge (Fleming, 2003; Morrison, 2009).

Building from narrative ideas, Morrison (2009) decided to explore media portrayals about mental illness with general nursing students. This was an educational rather than therapeutic process, and the idea was to support moves towards less stigmatising ways of thinking. Students developed alternative stories about mental illness than they would likely have been exposed to through general attitudes and negative media portrayals (Morrison, 2009).

In introducing this example, I do not seek to replicate Morrison's detailed description, with its illuminating links to the underpinning narrative literature (for this, see Morrison, 2009, 2010). Here, I give a brief account of the process, and explain some small ways that I adapted it for use with social work students.

The cohort with which I worked were undergraduate social work students. I was able to bring this way of working into a module considering contemporary issues in social work. Ideally, the process would have been introduced quite early on in the students' learning journey. However, due to modular constraints at the time, it took place when students were on their second practice placements. Overall, the module included workshop-style sessions and groupwork, with a separate presentation used for formal assessment at the end.

The plan for using narrative ideas was introduced at the beginning of the module as a formative exercise. The emphasis was on process, rather than theory, although it was important to give some theoretical and practice context (Storø, 2012). In discussing the idea with the students, I was keen to open the space for different kinds of stories. As part of an introduction, the cohort watched and discussed a video of the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie (2009) talking about 'the danger of a single story'. In the talk, Adichie discusses her experiences of seeing and being seen by others through a single lens. This helped set a platform for thinking with the students about what kind of stories they would like to focus on.

Given the broad nature of the social work task, I worked with the students to include other narratives (mental health and distress being one possibility). Most students chose areas that connected with the lives of people they had worked with on placement. To avoid too diffuse a focus, students were asked to choose one particular area to consider. Examples included narratives focusing on young people in public care, people living on the streets, older people, people seeking asylum and families on low incomes or benefits.

To give time for students to develop their reflections, they were asked to keep a regular brief journal over a number of weeks, based on media portrayals they were reading and/or watching. Then, following Morrison (2009), each student was asked to compile a written account of how people they were focusing on were portrayed in the media (newspapers, television, film, radio, social media and so on). This account would critically highlight 'thin' stories. It also required imagination about the possible values, capabilities and preferred ways of being, as well as the hopes and dreams, of the people being portrayed. The accounts that students prepared were to be relatively brief and designed to be read out to other students in a kind of storytelling.

The last stage of the process was to bring small groups of students together to share their stories, to listen to the stories of others and to engage in what could be called reflective dialogue. To prepare for this, some time was spent talking together about creating a safe space and thinking about personal

disclosure. (Morrison's (2009) creative blend of 'reflecting team' and 'outsider witness' practices allowed for a structured approach to group reflection. Overall guidelines were that, rather than adding opinion or evaluation, group members would comment on:

> Which particular image or expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you?
>
> What did these images or words suggest to you about the lives of the people [the story was about]?
>
> What is it about your own life or work that explains why these images caught your attention?
>
> (Morrison, 2009, pp. 22–4)

After listening to this feedback, the storyteller was invited to add their own reflections. When each member of the group had done this, a final group reflection moved towards what students hoped to take forward with them from this experience into practice.

Some reflections on working this way with students

The following brief reflections draw on my experience in setting up the process overall, and working closely with two of the reflecting teams. In the future, a study about students' experiences would provide a useful additional perspective.

As described above, the process I used with students was simple. Although there was a clear structure, the emphasis was not on technique, or needing a strong grasp of narrative ideas (Morrison, 2009). The experience of reflecting, individually, imaginatively (Fairburn, 2002) and in dialogue with others (Freire, 1996), provided the opportunity for learning.

Students did express some anxieties in preparing for this. Particularly in the beginning, there was a desire to 'do the right thing'. For example, several students were concerned about what they 'should' be writing in their journals. Moving from 'should' to a more reflective stance is an important developmental task. Finding ways to more consistently include experiential and reflective spaces throughout the social work programmes is balanced against the need to cover specific content. To make use of these types of learning experiences, and to take the learning forward into practice, more attention needs to be paid to scaffolding this in the context of the curriculum overall. In this instance, students sharing examples of their journal entries seemed to help allay some initial anxieties and get the process going. The following journal excerpt conveys the sense of getting involved in the narratives, and beginning to imagine what experiences might be underneath:

> Dramatic labels such as the Calais 'jungle' sends the message that these people are not humans . . . The fact that they have suffered hardship and lost their possessions . . . is quickly forgotten, instead they are portrayed as dangerous and undesirable people ...

In another example, a student begins to connect reflection with practice placement experience. Here the student wonders about the negative portrayal of children in public care in a television programme:

> Foster children are already seen by society in a negative, troubled way, maybe this is due to people imagining that they've had the worst possible past leading them into care. But the children I've met ... are the most inspiring and brave young people and children . . .

Following the journaling, the reflecting team process allowed new dimensions to emerge, including a thickening of the stories. I noticed that this enabled movement from an empathic response to distressing and difficult experiences to thinking also about the strengths and hopes of people. In the two groups I observed, students began to look beyond the narratives in which they had personally become interested. Several students were struck by the stories others were sharing, and commented that they had not thought of things from these different perspectives before, or even much about a particular group of people.

When empathy is developed alongside reflective capacity, there is a reduced likelihood of 'empathic distress' in which students over-identify with traumatic experiences (Grant, 2014). In contrast, the reflections

Creating space to think and feel – Reflections on teaching, learning and practice in social work, with insights from social pedagogy

5

here conveyed a sort of 'empathic solidarity' that might inform future actions (Banks, 2014, pp. 19–20). Students talked about a desire to take time to better understand the people they were working with; others talked about action for change in policy, service provision and media representation.

The structured questions, listed earlier, invited a mixture of personal and professional responses. The mixing of the personal and professional is often not comfortable terrain in social work. Attention needs to be paid to professional boundaries, and students need clarity about regulatory requirements and safe practice. However, what might be considered as appropriate in any one situation involves elements of subjectivity and negotiation. Issues of power need to be considered, but students also need opportunities to develop a more nuanced and ethical stance in relation to the use of self. Although the boundaries may be drawn in different places in social work, the professional, personal and private self (3 Ps) in social pedagogy offers a useful and challenging reflective framework for thinking about this (Petrie, 2011, pp. 84–91).

In the reflecting teams, some students resonated strongly with the experiences of people they had been thinking about, and shared something of their own stories. Interestingly this did not dominate in any of the accounts. Instead, there seemed to be a shift in the way the students were able to listen to each other, and more acceptance of different experiences and perspectives.

Eichsteller's (2010) consideration of social pedagogical *Haltung*, drawing on the work of Mührel, introduced the notions of 'comprehending' and 'regarding'. Comprehending points towards growing understanding of others, their way of life, through dialogue and empathy. In contrast, regarding relates to openness to what cannot be understood, to accepting people with deep respect for who they are. There is tension and need for movement between the two (Eichsteller, 2010). While these concepts relate to professional practice in social pedagogy, I tentatively suggest that a nascent sense particularly of comprehending and, to some extent, of regarding was present in the reflecting team discussions.

There is a growing momentum behind strengths-based approaches in social work (DoH, 2017; SCIE, 2018). At a practice level, this calls for a renewing of social work skills that recognise capabilities and strengths in individuals and communities, as well as different hopes, aspirations and needs. Being able to do this is a creative task, requiring thinking beyond dominant discourses, as well as empathy and a developing ethical perspective. There are different ways of supporting students to develop this stance. One example of this has been explored in this paper, and several others are explored in some of the material cited. These examples can be drawn on to think about and develop a 'process curriculum' (Holmström, 2014, p. 461), paying attention to developmental as well as academic outcomes.

For the students involved in the example discussed here, their experience was part of preparation for practice, rather than practice itself. In a practice scenario the constraints of agency and policy context come more fully into play, and often come into conflict with an ethical stance. These constraints also impact on social work education, and higher education more broadly (Mahony and Weiner, 2019). Courses need to prepare students for working in contemporary social work practice. The challenges explored earlier in this paper create a dilemma for social work education. Nevertheless, if new generations of social workers are going to think not only about what is required of them, but also about what kind of social work people need, then spaces to think, feel and develop are central, rather than luxuries that cannot be afforded.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the value of creativity in social work education. The wider context for social work in England, and possibly beyond, constrains space for creative and ethical practice. At the same time, this makes it more important for future social workers to be given opportunities to develop empathy and commitment to relationship building, as well as an ethical stance for practice. Social pedagogical thinking and practice provides a different framework for thinking through some of these issues. The connections and differences with social work (Cameron, 2013; Hatton, 2013; Charfe and Gardner, 2019; Kemp, 2011; Ruch et al., 2016) offer both encouragement and challenge. This paper is written in recognition of the need for both allies and critical friends towards social professional practice that is creative, humane and meaningful for the people it serves.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

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Creating space to think and feel – Reflections on teaching, learning and practice in social work, with insights from social pedagogy

7

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Creating space to think and feel – Reflections on teaching, learning and practice in social work, with insights from social pedagogy

9