

**Open Learn: Learning Space audio transcript**  
**K315\_1: Panel discussion on critical practice, Part 1**  
**Clip 1a**

**Winifred**

In this first discussion we're going to be looking at the meaning of critical practice, how the views of service users are taken into account and the professional power of social workers.

I'm Winifred Robinson, and with me today are Steve Trevillion, who's Professor of Social Work and Director of the School of Social Work at the University of Leicester. And, prior to that, he was Head of Social Work Education at the General Social Care Council. Steve, hello.

**Steve**

Hello.

**Winifred**

Susanna Watson's a qualified social worker. She's currently working in a community based adult care team in the south west of England. Susanna, hello.

**Susanna**

Hello.

**Winifred**

What is it then that you do?

**Susanna**

I work with a variety of service users – adults, older and younger adults, with physical impairments.

**Winifred**

Professor Andy Pithouse is also with us. He is Professor of Social Research at Cardiff University, where he specialises in Social Care and Health Services. He's also been a member of a number of reviews for the Welsh Assembly on Children and Social Work Services in Wales.

Andy, tell us a bit about your work.

**Andy**

Most of my work is evaluation studies into social care and health services. My current work is looking at advocacy services for children in the public care system - how well their voice is heard and how they participate in the various stages of the care system. And I'm also doing some work around error and mistakes in decision making by social workers, and looking at the difficulties and the problems they have in arriving at reliable decisions.

**Winifred**

And on the line from Edinburgh we have Maggie Mellon, who is Director of Services with Children First in Scotland. It was formally the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. And she's also a Board Member of the Scottish Child Law Centre, and of Community Care Provider Scotland. Maggie, hello.

**Maggie**

Hello.

**Winifred**

I'd like to start by looking at the whole concept of critical practice in social work, and what we mean by that. Maggie, perhaps you could start.

**Maggie**

For me critical practice is one of the most important concepts that social workers should have at the heart of their work. It's so necessary for learning from the job that we're doing, and learning how to help people make a difference in their lives. For me it's about turning good intuitive practice, once you have learned the social work task

in its elements, but it's about turning that into both teachable practice and into knowledge that the profession can then use in future and build on.

**Winifred**

Steve Trevillion.

**Steve**

Well I think Maggie's absolutely right to emphasis what a core issue this is. Critical practice is absolutely at the heart of good social work practice. As a phrase, of course, it's quite a recent phrase. But, in a sense, the ideas behind it have a very long history within social work. And you can certainly trace them back to all the interest that there was in radical social work practice, in social work with a social conscience, and so on.

**Winifred**

But what does it mean, 'critical practice'? What do we mean when we say that?

**Steve**

I think, behind the idea of critical practice, lies the idea of critical thinking and analysis. And certainly all the older debates about critical issues emphasise critical thinking as the root really of critical practice.

**Steve (contd.)**

Critical thinking, of course, there is a very long history. And, in one sense, it's all tied up with the questioning approach and the refusal to take things for granted. The idea of critical practice can sound very theoretical, even philosophical, because it deals in issues around questioning assumptions and refusing to take things for granted.

However, I think it's worth pointing out that, whenever I talk to service users, one of the first things they emphasise about what's important to them in terms of the social workers they meet is that those social workers are questioning people, are reflective people, are people who can put their problems and concerns in a broader context and really think about it. What they don't want are people who are automatons, people who are they feel are just following procedures. So it's something that people value, as well as being an important concept for academics and professionals.

**Winifred**

Andy Pithouse, would you then draw a distinction between a social worker who is engaged in critical practice and somebody who is simply ... I suppose, if they were a doctor, you would say practising defensively ... doing what they know is in the law, doing what is laid down in the regulations, doing what the boss says.

**Andy**

Yes that's a good point. I think most social workers don't have much choice, to an extent. They have to work within legislation and statute. They have to work in relation to certain sets of standards about activities and outcomes. Those are, in many respects, necessary things. And the issue is, not so much are there procedures and technical legal requirements, which of course there are; they have to pursue those. It's to what extent they can take those forward more, and humanise them, and deal with the always with the uncertainty and the exigencies of practice. Practice is never straightforward and clear. You can't apply some sets of certain predictions to the world of social work and the lives of the people we seek to assist.

And so I think critical theory is about having a number of perspectives. You obviously have the organisational perspective, as I say, standards, ethics, requirements and so forth by law. But you also have other perspectives around the rights of people - people's own particular understanding and needs, seeing the world from their own particular perspective. So it's about being empathic, intuitive and searching for ways of promoting people's interests and abilities. And that is a critical theory ... was once described more as sort of a form of jazz, where you extemporise, where you pick up a number of themes. You have an underlying rhythm going through, but you're adding pieces to it as you build in different perspective ... a sort of 'bricolage' of ideas and themes. And of course critical theory is also about being critical about yourself.

And so it's not simply the right to criticise the system as such. The system will always be there, we can't be without one. It's about having a sense of balance and proportionality to the complex world of people's lives and recognising that, by and large, there are no real certainties in much of what we do.

**Maggie**

Could I just add something there about critical practice as opposed to what works, which has had quite a lot of discussion and focus in social work ... you know, what works a ... and which it did need to have because there wasn't a lot of knowledge or gathered knowledge about what kind of interventions and help was useful to people. But I think what critical practice does is move that one on, because we know that, you know, rubbing two sticks together can create a spark that lights a fire. But, if you didn't move on from that, we wouldn't have had much more effective ways of, and quicker ways of, lighting fires. So I think critical practice actually develops what we know and takes it on to another level and helps us to improve our work.