

Open Learn: Learning Space audio transcript
K315_1: Panel discussion on critical practice, Part 1
Clip 1b

Winifred

Susanna Watson, I want to bring you into the discussion because I know that you are fairly recently qualified. How useful is this idea of critical practice when you start work, or is it simply something that belongs in the textbook and then, when the textbook is closed, is never pulled out again?

Susanna

No, I think it is useful. I think it provides an invaluable framework for what you're doing and, in a way, helps you to analyse what you are doing and to make decisions from that analysis.

I mean, an example ... I worked a couple of years ago with an older woman, who had some early stages of dementia and was also a heavy drinker. And she lived with her adult daughter, who was her carer. Her adult daughter had a learning difficulty, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to care for her mother.

There were some concerns, I think, when the daughter became very stressed. She often shouted at her mother and there were worries that maybe some times she sort of pushed and shoved her, just because of the levels of stress she was under. And the daughter made it very clear that she was wanting to move out of the house. She was wanting to live independently. She didn't want to look after her mother anymore. Her mother was equally clear that she wanted to stay at home but there were real concerns that, without her daughter there, she really wouldn't manage. She was becoming increasingly forgetful. On one occasion she was eating the cat food. She was very confused sometimes about where she was.

So you had the conflicting rights of the daughter, who was wanting to move out ... the mother who was wanting stay at home. The GP was saying that he felt that the mother's main problem, if you like, was her alcoholism and she had a right to drink. The psychiatrist was saying her dementia means that she doesn't really know how much she's drinking. She's vulnerable from that point of view.

So you have a whole plethora of different perspectives, different ideas about what's going on. And none of those ideas are wrong, and none of them are wholly right. And within all that you have to try and come to some decisions about actions that need to be taken, and how to work with that situation.

Winifred

So what did you do?

Susanna

I worked with her over quite a long period, probably between six months and a year, whilst her daughter was looking for accommodation to move to.

Winifred

Did you ever consider trying to persuade the daughter to stay, because obviously for social services that would be the cheapest option?

Susanna

No. I didn't, because I mean that wasn't an option because the daughter was clearly expressing her wish to move, and she was being supported by her own social worker in that move. What I could do was to talk to her mother about the fact that her daughter was moving out ... to repeat that again and again and again so that she did eventually understand that was inevitable.

And she began to understand that she would have to think about how she was going to manage in that situation. And we tried ... we tried different things. At one stage her daughter, again at a particularly stressful moment, was needing an immediate break. Her mother, with some persuasion, agreed to go and stay in a care home for about a week. And then, after that, I was able to talk to her about what she had and hadn't liked about that particular place, and sort of talked to her some more about what might happen next.

And eventually we found a small group home that was happy to accept her, very much as she was - that would still allow her to drink in moderation anyway, and would allow her to smoke, and was a kind of comfortable atmosphere. It wouldn't insist on having a bath, which was something she had loathed in the previous place she'd been in. And just gradually, bit by bit, she agreed to move and, because she was able to move at the same time as her daughter, I think it felt like a kind of logical life progression. And she actually settled very well in her new home, eventually.

Winifrid

Having heard that story, is there anything that anyone around the table would like to draw out from that?

Steve

What I would say is it's a very good illustration actually of the benefits of working closely with people first of all - listening to their views and trying to think ahead in a situation as well, and not just perhaps attend to an immediate crisis ... and try to think about where things are going, having a kind of long-term strategy which is developed in partnership with the people you are working with.

I think it raises all sorts of really interesting questions about the complexity of social work practice and the way in which listening to people can be extremely complex, because you're often dealing with more than one person, more than one set of views and more than one set of interests. In a sense, I think critical practice is designed just that ... for exactly that situation, to help you negotiate a way through some of these complex situations.

Winifred

Andy Pithouse, I wonder if sometimes some of the language used in the texts isn't sometimes unnecessarily complex?

Andy

Yes, I think that is the case. I mean, when you look at some of the texts, these are fairly impenetrable, theoretical, philosophical positions. But they should be tackled nonetheless, I think, by students and ideally with some critical facility themselves about whether these are actually going to have any benefit, in terms of everyday practice of course. But the underlying ideas of critical theory are about being creative, being intuitive, assertive, thinking about change, thinking about rights and tackling injustice.

Essentially critical theory is about being in a position to recognise, as Steve has just said, that there are many and competing voices in relation to our modern lives. And so, the critical theory social worker, for want of a better phrase, has to negotiate the views of education, adult services, the local community, the client and family, and so forth, and recognise that there are some very different interests and different ways of understanding those. And you can't simply operate with the one formal theory. Let me give you an example. I mean, if you visited somebody, a service user in a home for people with learning disabilities, that particular person was engaging in repetitive self-harming behaviour - banging their head in some way ... and I can think of a recent case I was involved with. Well clearly you could go and get a psychologist, and do behaviourist intervention and use sanctions and rewards to possibly change that behaviour. But I think you've also got to think about whether that person is

behaving like that because the environment is unstimulating, because no one quite understands their emotional needs; because they may be missing some intimate person in their lives. One's got to think around the corner and in very imaginative ways to consider the causes and the solutions to people's behaviours. But it shouldn't be a recipe for paralysis and endless introspection. It must be about action. Critical theory and critical practice must be about action and change.