

Open Learn: Learning Space audio transcript
K315_1: Panel discussion on critical practice, Part 2
Clip 2a

Winifred

Well we focused mainly on the professional's point of view, and I'd like to move this on now, if we could, to the people who use social services. Maggie Mellon, what about this idea of negotiation? Because I imagine that sometimes, in your work, you have to take decisions which some of the people who come to you may not like.

Maggie

Well yes. Here I'd like to use the example of family group conferencing, which Children First pioneered, or championed, in Scotland and is now providing in partnership with a range of local Authorities here. And that, sort of, turns the question around. Rather than saying, you know, we make decisions about people, it's a family led decision making process. And we found that it can be used very helpfully in taking decisions, not away from social workers ... because sometimes you do have to make life-changing decisions about children and sometimes you need to use statutory powers and the authority of the social worker ... but mainly, if you bring together the family around the interests or the issues which are concerning you about the child, you get a different quality of decision, and one that isn't made about people but that is made with people, and taking into account their whole perspective and the range of perspectives that any family would bring to a situation.

Winifred

But sometimes you must make decisions about people?

Maggie

Well I think the question was, you know, why are service users' views important in decision making? And of course sometimes you do have to make decisions about how you'll approach something. Having a family conference or making ... or some other way of working with people is making a decision. Involving people in decisions about their lives is not a gift that you give them, it's actually a right that they have. And it's also common sense.

Every decision that's important and life changing, if you haven't essentially put that person and made them feel in charge of it, you are making them an object of your decision making, and generally it won't work. Actually that's where a number of tragedies and poor outcomes come from.

Winifred

But I'm sorry to press you but what happens when people really won't co-operate with you? You're saying that you have to make people feel, or you have to empower them, or you have to let them lead the decision making. But what if you are making decisions in the interests of children, and the adults in those processes oppose you and are unhappy with your decision making, as must often happen?

Maggie

Well of course the welfare of the child in that case is paramount. But I think it's interesting you say what if people won't co-operate with you. I think that's where critical thinking comes in, and you do actually have to think why is co-operation not happening? Now it can be that somebody is generally malevolent and wishes to do harm to children. But that's not most of the situations that social workers find themselves in. So, if you get a situation of lack of co-operation, I think that is very much a point of critical reflection about what that's about and how you can move from non co-operation to co-operation in the best interests of the children that we work with.

Winifred

Andy Pithouse, where conflicts can arise between service users and professionals, we've heard there about the family case conference as one way of trying to balance those different interests ... if you look across the different service user groups, the elderly, mental health, learning difficulties, asylum seekers, perhaps offenders, can you give me some other examples of how those conflicts can be resolved, balanced, acknowledged?

Andy

Yes I think that, within the literature, it suggests that we should be in partnership with the people we seek to help, and that the people we seek to help are also in a sense experts of their own particular situation. I'm something of a heretic here in some ways. I'm never entirely sure people are experts of their own circumstances. I don't think I am an expert in my circumstances. People who know me may well agree with that. But ...

Winifred

But aren't you more expert than anyone else?

Andy

No, well what I was saying is none of us work in conditions of perfect knowledge. No one knows all the answers. And much of both critical practice and aspects of a user led service are that we have to be just a little bit modest about all the facts that we do know. And we do have to work with people to, if you like, co-produce a solution to a shared problem. And in that sense I don't think any of us should be ... we should all be rather wary about claiming expert status. And so, you know, I think it is that question of thinking creatively with others to find solutions and us as being as fellow travellers with the people we are working with.

But again, we come back to the other point that colleagues have made that what is particular to social work is that critical judgement to know whether we can be fellow travellers and work in a constructive partnership approach, or whether we do in fact have to say, "I'm sorry but we have to make a definitive judgement here, which you may not like, but which we think is essential". And there's plenty of evidence of social workers who have gone dangerously down the road of openness and partnership, and have taken the word and the faith of the people they've been working with and have come a cropper in a serious way.

And I think critical practice is also about being critical about the literature we read and views within that literature. Partnership is a good idea, but it doesn't work with someone who is trying to deceive you. And there's lots of examples of social workers who have been gullible and have accepted the partnership idea, much to the damage of themselves and the profession, I think. But that's ... that may be a minority view, but it's one that I tend to share. And I think there are recent court ... may I just read you something?

Winifred

Yes. I was going to say give us an example.

Andy

Well here is an example. These largely occur, I think you will find, in child protection matters sadly. But here is a social worker, and this is the judgement of the court. 'We do not accuse social worker X of wilful neglect. We do not accuse him of culpable disorganisation: meaning to do something but never getting round to it, for example. But he seems to have drifted along, secure in his own first impression that all would be well. He was happy to rely on the mother to be his main source of information about the child. It was even more concerning that he accepted, without challenge,

what she said about herself, because he was not critical. He did not respond to the increasing level of risk in the child's environment. He simply didn't listen.

Winifred

Susanna Watson, can you provide us with an example of this that isn't about children because obviously it arises in other areas?

Susanna

Yes. I think it's a slightly different situation, working with adults. Because, broadly speaking, outside the Mental Health Act there isn't a lot of sort of firm legislation that can allow you to take decisions against somebody's will. I mean, largely speaking, adults are considered, you know, able to make decisions about their lives; able to make mistakes about their lives. And there isn't legally a lot that we can do about that a lot of the time. So I think it's a different situation from child protection work.

I think what we find ourselves involved in, a lot more of the time, is perhaps trying to persuade people ... trying to help people see another point of view that their situation could be different, as it were.

Winifred

Maggie, you wanted to come in.

Maggie

Yes I think that perhaps, if we listen to people more and went with their suggestions and solutions, we might build different services that were what people wanted. And a lot of the time it's been not listening to what people want. I mean, we've built a 'Looked After' system, which ... where the outcome ... for children when they are removed from their parent's care, where the outcomes are not very good, where most of those who come out of it don't do very well in life and where, if we'd actually listened to the children and their families in the first place, we might build different services. We might have far more community resources. We might actually still have home helps going in and cleaning out, and helping people to live in their own houses, rather than a whole infrastructure of assessment and then people being packaged off into care homes.

So I mean, if you listen to people and you work with them and they come up with solutions, and you think, "What would it need to resource that?", then we might build different social services in the country.