



Open Learn: Learning Space audio transcript

K315_1: Panel discussion on critical practice, Part 2

Clip 2c

Winifred

Andy Pithouse, this may not be what you wanted to talk about, but I want to ask you how does this idea of power and the power held by social workers play itself out when professionals have to share decision making, as they're encouraged to do now? And the social worker may be ... and we've just heard there the social worker in the voluntary sector less powerful than the social worker working with the local authority. Is the social worker less powerful, I don't know, than the doctor or the teacher? How does that play itself out in practice?

Andy

Well power's a very complicated notion, and we can only touch on it here really. But power in social work is clear and objective in some senses, and also very abstract and tacit, and almost ambivalent in other senses. And a lot of social work is negotiation. And so, if you looked at it you as a scheme, you could say, "Well okay we've got power at the level of an organisation within the law ... we have particularly ... within our therapeutic skills, our knowledge base, there's power to define there".

And you can say that power in social work really resides at the level of assessment, where we as social workers define what the problems are, what we think the solutions might be, ideally with others in partnership, but often a power resides in an interpersonal sense as well insofar as social workers may withhold knowledge. They may withhold information as a means of power. They may engage necessarily in all kinds of effective strategies to win the result that they want for their particular case.

And of course power also resides with service users. They too may not say everything, tell everything, or explain everything. They have a view of the social worker, and they have a view of their own lives, and they're not fools, and they will disclose what they wish to disclose. So power operates in all kinds of strange liquid ways in social work, if you like, and it's never quite clear at any one point in time how it's operating.



Andy (contd.)

And I think the skilled social worker is one who can operate at a number of levels. And so, when they are with GP's and teachers, over whom they have no authority, when they're with multi agencies working to find a solution over whom they have no line management, the social worker has got to be a really skilled organisational operator there, crossing all these boundaries, dealing with all these other particular identities and people and egos and interests. And I think the skilled social worker is one who can actually hear and manage all these different discourses and find solutions within them. And that's quite a modern identity, quite a modern task and it's not much well described by national occupational standards, not well described by social work ethical frameworks. These are real everyday skills, which you pick up by experience. And its experience bumping into theory where new ideas come from, and I think that's where power is as well.

Winifred

Susanna, can you give us some ideas of your experience then of the negotiating that you have had to do, I suppose between individuals, organisations, systems?

Susanna

Yeah, a couple of thoughts really. I mean I would entirely agree with Steve that this... that the power that the social worker has is quite a kind of a double-edged sword, and it can be used well and it can be abused as well. I personally think that we still have quite a lot of discretionary power, even with the sort of regulatory framework within which we work, and all the rest of it. I think we can make quite a difference, and our own views of the situation can influence the outcome of an assessment and what social services is prepared to provide.

Winifred

Give us an example?

Susanna

I was thinking of a woman, an older woman I worked with, who lived at home and she had really ... she'd had enough. She'd had enough of being at home. She was in a lot of pain from arthritis. She was just very tired, really. And she very much wanted to move into a local Methodist Group home, care home, where she knew some other people, and she herself was a lifelong Methodist. And she felt that this was where she wanted to be. But sort of, strictly speaking, if you look down the list of the kind of criteria of what help somebody needed in order to qualify for social services funding to go into a care home, she was pretty border line. She managed fairly well at home really without a huge amount of help. She had a very strong character. And I really felt that, if she didn't get this, if she wasn't able to move, she would actually just give up and things would just go completely to pieces, and she would be very disappointed and eventually probably, in a few months time, she would need a care home place because she would have given up at home.



Susanna (contd.)

But, in a way then, I had to argue her case. Knowing what the eligibility criteria were, I had to sort of argue her case along those lines, sort of acknowledging that her physical impairments weren't on the surface apparently sufficient to justify this move, but there were other reasons why the move should be funded. And it was accepted, and I think that's the kind of, a use of our discretionary power. When you listen to the story that someone's telling you, and you actually kind of try and almost translate it into the bureaucratic language that you know the agency will understand and will accept.

Winifred

But still telling the truth?

Susanna

But still telling the truth, and still actually ... I mean firmly believing that this was ... I mean, I genuinely believed that this was the right ... the right solution for this person. I didn't feel I was making anything up.

Andy

Yes, I just wanted to add to that, because I very much agree with your analysis there about the skills and negotiating skills of an affective social work practitioner in complex organisations. But I also think there's another area of power which we shouldn't overlook, and that's the power of the social work as a profession, in a sense, to argue its case with some effect. And I'm not entirely sure that we do that particularly well these days.

But I certainly would go back to Wales where I come from, in the early 1980's, where it was social workers engaging, lobbying, civil servants in what was then the Welsh Office, to really engage forcefully with the de-institutionalisation idea for learning disabilities. And social workers working with civil servants, working with local politicians, emptied out the hospitals and got people into community based settings, because they had a sense of critical practice and theory from normalisation theory. And that was a really good example of the social work profession getting together to support people coming out of the hospitals, living effectively in settings which were relatively well supported, at that particular time. And it was a success. It really was a landmark success in Wales, twenty five years ago or more. And was seen ... people came from Japan, Canada, and the States to have a look at what we were doing. It was good. It was a really good example of the profession leading the way, in a sense, and arguing the case effectively. And I'm not sure we'd have enough power these days within policy networks that we once had, and I do think we need to speak again with a more assured voice, I think.



Steve

I just wanted to add something else to what Andy said, because I thought it was such an important example really, of the role of social work as a profession. And there is a constant debate that I feel I have with social students about what is real social work. And, very often, social work students, maybe even qualified social workers, come to regard real social work as the time that you spend with an individual who needs a service. Now, of course, that's absolutely vital and absolutely the core of social work practice. But I think we've had a number of examples of areas of work which involves social workers working with other professionals, with other organisations, operating from time to time politically. And all of this is real social work. And social work in some ways is defined by its ability to move between different levels. It's a very good example of different types of power.

It's also a very good example of the relevance of critical practice as an idea, because that idea of critical practice binds together those different levels of intervention. It justifies why you're intervening in the lives of individuals. It underpins your work with other organisations, and acts as the basis for your more political activities.

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'Professional power'
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