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# Critical social work practice a narrative approach

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# The Narrative Practitioner

Developing Excellence in Research, Education and Practice

# The International Journal of Narrative Practice



## International Journal of Narrative Practice (IJNP)

### Introduction

This new journal is an eclectic publication that draws on different uses of narratives in research, education and practice. As such, it is not confined to any one area or discipline. Submissions from practitioners and academics in any discipline are encouraged and it is planned to have guest editors and single theme issues. The publication will come out four times a year (Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter) and the first and second issues will be devoted to presentations and papers from the 2<sup>nd</sup>. International Narrative practitioner Conference, held at Glyndŵr University in June 2008.

The journal will initially be published as an online journal but it is planned to develop it as an academic journal, published in hard copy.

### Vision

Much of human life is conducted through narrative accounts of events and experiences. Many of our social institutions are comprised almost entirely of opportunities for telling and re-telling stories, for sharing the narratives that constitute our lives. We have all had experience of relating to and living vicariously inside the stories that are told by others, whether they are stories about their own lives or stories of the kind that we encounter in literature and film, that writers create, using elements of their experience. Narratives, therefore offer a method of teaching and communicating with one another about professional matters.

### The aims of the journal are:

To engage participants in a multidisciplinary dialogue around the use of narratives in research education and practice

To facilitate ongoing collaboration in the development of narrative communities

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# The Narrative Practitioner

Developing Excellence in Research, Education and Practice

**The International Journal of Narrative Practice (IJNP)**

## Welcome and Introduction

I want to welcome you to the first issue of our new journal, The International Journal of Narrative Practice (IJNP). The journal is for anyone, in any context, who uses narratives in any way. We welcome narratives from fields as diverse as the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Philosophy and Ethics as well as from professionals in any area. The first issue is the beginning of an ongoing conversation, which we hope you will join with. The journal will come out four times a year corresponding to Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter issues (see Notes for contributors).

This issue comes out just as the 3<sup>rd</sup>.International Conference takes place at Keele University, UK. It promises to be a very exciting event with a variety of workshops, art exhibitions, performances, presentations, music and storytelling. Next year's conference will take place in North Wales at Glyndŵr University in June 2010. We hope you will join us ([www.thenarrativepractitioner.co.uk](http://www.thenarrativepractitioner.co.uk)).

There are a variety of interesting ways of using narratives and this is reflected in this issue. Papers in this issue were presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup>. International Conference on Narratives at Glyndŵr University in June 2008. I hope you enjoy this first issue and that it motivates you to engage with the community of narrative practitioners.

**Alex Carson (Chief Executive Editor)**

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# Critical Social Work Practice: A Narrative Approach. Karen D. Roscoe and Iolo Madoc Jones

Glyndwr University Wrexham North Wales

## Abstract:

This paper outlines the theory and approach of narrative therapy and applies this specifically to the context of contemporary practice in social work. This paper explores the use of externalising conversations to assist service users to re-author their lives. The problems inherent in adopting narrative approaches in Care Management is explored arguing that critical practice in social work requires a need to develop a language for practice which provides for recognition of the skilful activity of the work that social workers do.

The social work endeavour, to promote change, problem solve and with the emphasis on empowerment of people is outlined in the definition of social work in the International Federation of Social Workers (2000).

Social work is a profession that promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being (International Federation of Social workers, 2000, p. 1).

This was also reflected in the Barclay Report (1982) when social workers were reconceptualised as 'Care Managers'. The report highlighted that whilst social workers were to assess needs and commission the provision of social care, the second activity was to provide

'face to face communication between clients and social workers, in which social workers are helping service users to tolerate, or to change, some aspect of themselves or of the world in which they are living' (p.33-34)

Stepney (2008) argues however, that the broader vision of change and empowerment in social work 'calls for social workers to be innovative, creative and preventative' (p. 1302). Whilst social work has a long history of the prevention of risk and resource management with vulnerable people, the authors argue that it *is* possible to be creative and adopt critical practice in the current climate of social work. This may be considered difficult in contemporary social work as Howe (1992, 1996) argues that the profession has become proceduralised with interventions functional almost to the exclusion of any creativity or skill. This exclusion of creativity is understood by many as a consequence of the more authoritarian elements of social work practice under 'Community Care' policy because of its emphasis on managerial outcomes. Ife (1997) suggests that the 'traditional' social work role, termed by Harris (2008) as the 'therapeutic enterprise' has eroded because of social works relationship and location with the welfare state. Ife (1997) understands this as managerialism, which adopts a realist view of the world and a deep respect for positivist quantitative approaches to describing and measuring outcomes.

According to Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996) the fragmentation and routinisation of complex professional tasks in assessment and Care Management privilege managerial over professional values and objectives. In this concentrated role as assessor, Ellis (1999) points out that social workers are less able to engage in long term work and the notion of the 'brief' case work has become the favoured method for practice. Milner (2001) argues however that brief case work is considered to be influenced by the 'forensic gaze' of psychology, seen as resulting in categorising and homogenising service users. As a result, creative and critical practices which adopt narrative approaches and challenge dominate ways of viewing service users 'problems' is often less heard of in the climate of Care Management. Reissman (2005), for example, points out that the contribution of narrative approaches in social work practice is scarce in contrast to narrative therapy developed By White and Epston (1996) in the Dulwich Centre in Australia.

## **Narrative Approaches and Social Work.**

Narrative approaches emerged in the 1980's with the social constructionist movement and other relativist approaches to social sciences (Gergen, in Kazdim, 2000). Narrative approaches have primarily been located in the relativist ontological position. From this position, nothing is deemed to exist outside language and events, occurrences or even the boundaries between perceived objects exist only in language. Practice from this perspective is concerned with understanding how individuals identify, order and come to put meaning onto events and how the individual shapes themselves through the stories they create about themselves, others and the world around them.

For White & Epston (1990) problems can be created because of the 'stories' people draw on or create. White (1986, 1988/89, 1991) refers to this as 'problem saturated' stories. Over time it is understood that a 'dominant plot' (Morgan, 2000) may emerge that can create and sustain problems for the individual or, at the very least, can serve to restrict individuals in analysing their story critically. Freedman and Combs (1996) suggest that the aim of narrative social work practitioners is to work with people to bring forth alternative stories or to thicken contradictions to the problems saturated story so that they do not support or sustain problems. White's (1986, 1988/89, 1991) methodology, involves externalising social and behavioural difficulties (Jessup and Rogerson, 1999) that enable service users' to reconstruct the dominant problem saturated story/plot.

In social work, and from a purely social constructionist perspective, this practice would be located within a 'seekers after meaning' paradigm in Howe's (1980) taxonomy of social work theories. The social worker here is concerned with how the social world is understood subjectively. Stories however, constitute aspects of people's identity and provide a background context that gives coherence to their lives (Monk et al, 1997). Therefore, narrative is not only a linguistic matter; it is a powerful and early-acquired way an individual interprets his/her identity and that of other people (Bruner, 1986, 1991; Sarbin, 1986). From this social constructionist perspective, we speak ourselves into existence within the stories available to us.

The ways we speak and the things we speak about are part of our cultural heritage; they are handed down to us, and they are our tools for making sense" (Monk et al, 1997, p. 34).

The assumption from which the narrative approach is developed is that people make meaning and meaning is not made for us (White, 1990). Such stories may be formed from discourses which Foucault identified and described as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, p.49). In this sense, a discourse is a

group of statements which provide a language for talking about - a way of representing the knowledge about - a particular topic at a particular historical moment (Hall, 2001, p.72).

For simplicity's sake, discourses can be understood here as ideas that exist in linguistic or behavioural forms e.g. sexism exists as a discourse arising from the use of words and the sentences, and as a behavioural practice. Such discourses can be identified in the context of service users' lives and 'problems'; for example, 'depression' 'stress', and 'alcoholic.' These terms provide a language for talking about; a way of representing what an 'alcoholic' might look like. Such descriptions produce a set of expectations that positions the person within an available discourse. For example, wife or mother; these reflect a particular positioning in relation to others. However, it is possible to hold positions in several discourses at the same time (Monk et al, 1997). For example, a wife may also be feminist. For White, the extensive use of Foucault's notion of discourse is emphasised in the context of removing relatively fixed qualities which are ascribed to persons, specifically in the context of identity (Jessup and Rogerson, 1999). Thus, in our narratives, we outline our perceptions of self and which assumes that identity is not stable or a fixed singular entity. Moreover, people do not just choose a discourse from an available menu but rather can create, reinforce and sustain

dominant discourses. As a result, they may draw upon and 'frame' (Goffman, 1986) stories or discourses in specific ways. Stories can become patterns of behaviour, ways of seeing the world which colour perception and interpretation and become problematic in service users lives.

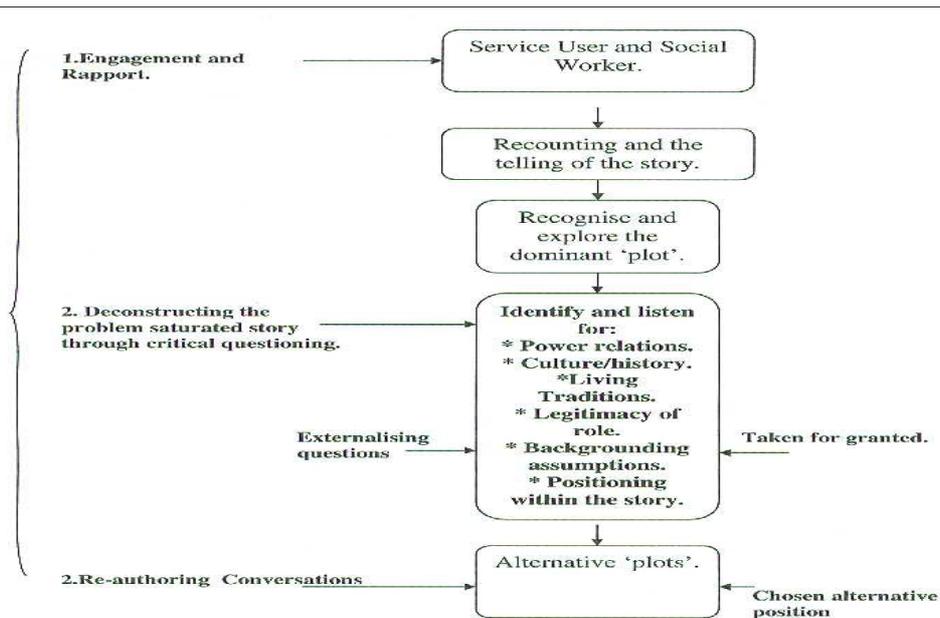
In practice, the authors understand that people's narratives are shaped and influenced but *not* determined solely by dominant discourses. Therefore, the social worker here works with the service user to develop and encourage alternative constructions which make it possible to work in an empowering and anti-oppressive way by developing potential, rather than focusing upon problems. Stories, drawing on Whites ideas are primarily based in a social constructionist approach. However, this approach can be criticised for ignoring the material inequalities that give rise to the constructions that people draw. According to Payne (1997) 'social constructionism stresses the social aspects of knowing and the influence of cultural, historical, political and economic conditions' (p. 31). Therefore, in order for the social worker to commit to anti-oppressive practice, acknowledging the wider structural inequalities that are sewn into western society is encouraged. Failure to do this can result in pathologising service users' and drawing on discourses that are inherited by western ideas of individualism and diagnostic 'treatment' (Milner, 2001). Normalised ways of viewing service users 'problem's does not promote critical practice, empowerment and change as it effectively ignores the power of discourse upon the subjective. Therefore, the authors in this paper argue that narrative ideas in social work practice require not only an understanding of social constructionist ideas, but the application of a narrative model through the lens of critical realism in order to develop critical practice successfully. As Reissman (2005) highlights, narrative approaches can be understood from a variety of perspectives.

Narrative enquiry in the human sciences is a 20<sup>th</sup> – century development; the field has 'realist', 'postmodern' and constructionist strands and scholars disagree on its origins and precise definitions (Reissman, 2005, p. 393).

For critical realists, the effects of structure and the possibility of the construing agent (human agency) are particularly important. They argue that the material world is not simply received but perceived and whilst the ways in which people can understand themselves are structured both by the available discourses in their social milieu and the material conditions in which they find themselves, these contexts 'offer a range of possible ways of being' (Sarantakos 2005, p.107). This perspective enables the social work practitioner to view human beings as part of the natural world and also to identify the possibility that their 'self' and subjectivity is altered by 'deliberately engineered environments' that constrain each persons construction of 'self' (Ward and Marshall, 2007). King (2004) argues that although structure has power over individuals, the structure is only reproduced by the individual.

"Since individuals are conscious agents, they are able to re-interpret their situation and consider new forms of actions" (King, 2004, p.71).

As Bhasker (1979) notes, 'people, in their conscious activity, for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantive activities of production' (p. 44). This perspective enables the social worker to recognise the material conditions (social structures) that give rise to constructions that people draw upon and the role of human agency in challenging these discourses. This enables the practitioner to challenge dominant discourses in order to influence a re-authoring process in collaboration with service users. The model proposed in this article is based upon three key stages, engagement and rapport, critical questioning and re-authoring conversations. The following diagram illustrates this process.



### Engagement and Rapport.

Engagement and rapport skills remain of vital importance in social work practice. However as Scott (2006) points out, its central importance is often unappreciated at times. It is therefore worth re-emphasising that in any article that offers models for practice, literature on what works in therapy consistently highlights that it is the quality of the relationship a service user develops with a worker that stands out as being most important determinant of the perceived success of an approach to practice (Lambert, 1992). Practitioners eager to work to or, like ourselves, document working models for practice, do well to keep this in mind.

Rapport refers to key concepts such as empathy, collaboration, trust and loyalty (Patton 2001; Springwood and King, 2001). Without these components, the social workers ability to adopt narrative approaches would be problematic. Humanistic qualities of unconditional positive regard and empathy remind social workers that it is important in any narrative analysis to *hear* the service user's story fully before considering whether a narrative approach would be purposeful. Without this, the social worker will not be able to progress to the later stages of this approach, that is, listening to the service user's problem saturated story and gently exploring this in the context of dominant discourses.

### Deconstruction and Critical Questioning Techniques

A key part of narrative approaches is that of deconstructing problem saturated stories. According to Winslade and Monk, (2000) exploring stories which may be problem generating involve the process of questioning taken for granted assumptions. Viewing things from a different perspective enables gaps or inconsistencies in a story to be identified. In this sense, we attempt to make the familiar, dominant story strange rather than simple.

The deconstruction process involves the use of externalising conversations. The aim of externalising conversations is to encourage service users to conceptualise themselves and their problem as separate and *not* the same thing. This is achieved through asking questions in which the adjectives that people use to describe themselves are changed into nouns. Hence instead of "how long have

you been stressed,” we ask ‘How long has the *stress* influenced you?’ (Carey and Russell, 2002). There are four general questions that we use:

- How has **{the problem}** affected your life?
- How long has **{the problem}** affected your relationships?
- How has **{the problem}** affected your view of yourself?
- Are these **{affects/influences}** helpful or unhelpful?

White and Epston (2005) argue that externalising a problem can undermine the sense of failure that often develops from problems. Equally that it helps form a therapeutic alliance in that the service users conceive of themselves as uniting with the worker against the problem. Once problems have been externalised they can be examined and critiqued. Through linguistic analysis, it is possible to explore and expose dominant discourses such as gender, poverty, sexuality. In discussion we open up the possibility for service users to re-think whole social categories (Jessup and Rogerson, 1999).

Empathic responding, according to Jessup and Rogerson (1999), is a post-structural approach in a narrative context as this involves critical questioning techniques.

Poststructuralists are concerned to move away from notions of ‘essential’ meanings of beliefs in a fixed, singular, logical order’ (Featherstone and Fawcett, 1995, p. 27).

Skills in interpersonal communication processes are inquiries into knowledge formations which enable taken for granted assumptions to be explored and surfaced. Jessup and Rogerson (1999) argue that questioning skills in this context help the interviewee identify what it is about their own ideas that enables them to sustain the problem.

In this sense, they are not only surviving’, but themselves re/producing a political structure which both disciplines them and punishes; which constructs their own prison (Jessup and Rogerson, 1999, p. 174).

### **Re-authoring**

Re-authoring conversations is an invitation to individuals to do what they usually do, that is, to link events of their lives in sequences through time according to alternative perspectives on events. Alternative narratives can be founded in unique outcomes. A unique outcome, as defined by White (1989) an aspect of a person’s lived experience that lies outside the dominant story. White (1989) suggests practitioners listen with a view to identifying “unique outcomes” and exploring them because they can act as a bridge between a dominant narrative (problem saturated story) and the re-authored alternative story. In any narrative, there will be instances where the problem was less influential and these instances may stand out in contrast to the dominant story. Unique outcomes however can go unnoticed without careful listening from the social worker as people can place less significance on events that do not support the ‘problem saturated story’. Themes or patterns of ‘unique outcomes’ can emerge which in turn can provide a type of scaffolding to re-author an alternative story/plot. Unique outcomes also provide a conduit for exploring identity. White (1989) suggests they open the doorway to exploring what the unique outcome means in terms of the person’s desires, intentions, preferences and beliefs.

### **Case Example.**

A 35 year old female was referred to social services on the grounds that another social worker had visited her parents and identified that from the age of 16, this service user had rarely left the house following her formal education. The service user was had Spina Bifida and was dependent upon a wheelchair for mobility. There were significant caring responsibilities within the household, as her

father had 'middle stages' of dementia and her older mother took the primary caring role within the household. The prevailing narratives that surrounded the service user, from the family and her, were saturated with stories of illnesses and disability. What became clear was that the service user's narrative centred upon her disability and underpinned her reasoning for why she had rarely left the house following her formal education. For example, 'it is because of my disability that I cant...' These statements were confirmed and reinforced by mum, who was reluctant for her daughter to have support from others to enable her to go out. As a result, the service user was socially excluded and had fixed ways of viewing disability that constrained her quality of life and opportunities. The social worker gained an agreement from the service user to explore her story further by utilising a narrative approach.

The worker in this case used externalising conversations with the primary objective to *situate* the problem (disability) away from the person, by asking the service users questions such as

- What has **the disability** tried to talk you into about going out and trying new things?
- How has **the disability** convinced you to remain at home?
- How does **the disability** link to your ideas about yourself?
- How has **the disability** been influencing your ideas about going to college?

These externalising questions avoided reinforcing the problem and locating disability in the context of identity. Questions which ran the risk of doing this were avoided, so questions such as the following were not used:

- Is **your disability** why you decide not to go out?
- Do you think **your disability** affects your ability to undertake a college course?
- Do you think **your disability** makes your situation worse?

The questioning techniques employed by the social work begin to explore how cultural and social expectations about disability impact upon the service users construction of self. In narrative approaches, this is often referred to 'mapping the effects of the problem' (White, 2007) through deconstruction. This involved the worker asking questions such as:

- Tell me how the disability has convinced you that it is not a good idea to go out.
- How do these ideas impact upon your current situation?
- In what ways does the disability convince you that you are unable to do or achieve certain things in your life?

In response to how these ideas impact upon the current situation, the service user recounts how she has occasionally went out with her Aunty to social activities. A 'unique outcome', contradiction to the narrative emerged, thus the worker used externalising questions to explore how the service user overcame feelings of the disability affecting her ability to go out. These can be identified as 'landscape of action' and the 'landscape of identity' questions (White, 2007). Landscape of identity questions are framed to capture the persons desires, wishes and preferences (Morgan 2000) and landscape of action questions facilitate further exploration of an identified unique outcome. Questions asked can be based around events or actions that led to the unique outcome, or events/actions that occurred after, as well as the distant past that can be linked to the unique outcome (Morgan 2000). In the context of the case study the landscape of action questions were framed in this way.

- **How** did you prepare yourself to go out this particular day without the disability talking you into staying in?

- **What** did your Aunty say about this when you told them that you had decided to go out with her?
- **What** were the steps leading up the decision to go out?

Whilst the landscape of identity questions were framed in the following way:

- **When** you agreed to meet up with your Aunty, what do you think this says about what you want for your life?
- **What** personal values is this course of action based upon?
- **When** you took the step to go out, what were you intending for your life?

Mapping and identifying unique outcomes that encourage a re-authoring conversation are ways in which to thicken an alternative plot, as opposed to the dominant plot which sustains the problem. Landscape of action and identity questions encourage service users to identify a specific event which can then be built into a sequence which then unfolds according to a valued theme (White, 2007) This process involved the service user and social worker collaboratively re-authoring an alternative story that contradicted the dominant storyline of disability.

By employing these questioning strategies, the re-authoring of the service users dominant story evolved. She did accept some project work support to go out and realised how her own story, saturated by taken for granted assumptions surrounding disability, impacted upon her own quality of life and opportunities. The social worker continued to support the service user returning to externalising questioning techniques when glimpses of the problem saturated story were potentially emerging.

The model for practice proposed in this article however offers practitioners a way to apply therapeutic processes within contemporary practice. Equally it offers not only a method of intervention which can sit comfortably with Care Management, but a useful tool in assessment for understanding constraints in service users lives. This requires the social worker to engage in 'critical practice'.

### **Critical Practice**

Being constructively critical and challenging accepted wisdom and practice theories/methods requires the social worker to adopt the stance of 'critical practice'. For Fook (2002), 'critical social work is primarily concerned with practising in ways which challenge domination, exploitation and oppression' (p. 18). Therefore, 'critical' in this paper is understood in the context of the sociological sense, that is, of 'critique' (Ferguson, 2003).

Critical social work practice emerged in the 1990's, influenced by a wide range of critical perspectives. These included feminism, racism, post-modernism and post-structuralism. According to Ferguson (2003), this influenced a paradigm of practice that seeks to reconstruct the idealised theoretical prescriptions of social work. In order words, a profession that seeks to challenge oppressive practices which consist of a variety of fixed ideas of service users problems which can sustain and reinforce oppressive practices.

In order to reconstruct some of the idealised theoretical prescriptions that are available in social work, for example, 'Care Management'; this paper has explored a model for practice that challenges social structures which produce and sustain oppressive practices. Through the application and use of a narrative model for social work practice, challenging oppressive social structures is applied in the socio-political and ideological context where meanings are influenced by material conditions (social structures), but considered to be socially constructed and sustained by the individual (Ferguson, 2003).

For Stepney (2008), the hallmark of critical practice in social work requires the social worker to respond to structural oppression in ways that are preventative. This opens up the possibility for change, recognising the importance of context and agency and the social worker here is required to develop skills that effectively challenge dominant discourses (Stepney 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Butler et al (2007) argue that 'we are aware that currently social workers have the power through statute, language and perspective, to define the experiences of others' (p.287).

When social workers enter helping relationships, they enter with their own biases and prejudices. It is these biases and prejudices that can, and often do, affect how they listen to the problems of service users and, ultimately, how they proceed to address them (Sakamoto and O. Pitner, 2005, p. 442).

The social worker in the context of the case study may use terms such as low self-esteem or depression which reinforce and add to the problem saturated story. Whilst it can be acknowledged that procedural models of assessment in social work tend to lean towards a 'problem' focus, the practitioner here is encouraged to gently brush over the landscape of the service user to identify and determine the discourses that sustain service users problems, but have material consequences. However, it is also worthy to note that when social workers automatically 'frame' problems in terms of sexism or racism for example, the service user may not define their problems in the same way (Sakamoto and O.Pitner, 2005).

In utilising narrative approaches in the model proposed in this paper, the social worker can position themselves as 'raisers of consciousness' in Howe's (1980) taxonomy of social work theories. Pre-determined structures of people with disabilities definitely had 'power over agent' in the case study presented, as the service user engaged in conscious *activity* of maintaining a role consistent to her constructions of disability, yet unconsciously reproduced this reality. The practitioner here works with the service user to identify how dominant discourses of disability have influenced the service user's ideas, feelings and thoughts and how re-interpreting her narrative provides an opportunity for re-construction, change and action. The social worker sees beyond phenomenology and social constructionism by looking at social structures which lie behind individual action and understanding as Joseph (2002) concludes, 'no human activity can exist outside the medium of social structures' (p. 9).

In short, such linguistic analysis discloses ideas, beliefs, norms, behaviours, which produce normalisations – in effect, expression of and [re]production of prevailing power structures around race, class, gender, poverty, sexuality and so on. As social workers, we can collude with this or attempt to shift discourses and their outcomes for individuals' (Pease and Fook, 1999, p. 171).

Critical practice in social work requires a need to develop a language for practice which provides for recognition of the skilful activity of their work. Rees (1991) argues that such practice is 'empowering' for both the recipient and the practitioner (in Pease and Fook, 1999). The skills used in critical questioning challenge social works problem-saturated view of a profession that is dominated by Care Management and managerialist outcomes. They offer reconceptualisations of methodologies that work with people in innovative and creative ways and adhere to the value base of anti-oppressive practice.

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