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**Escaping the frameworks:**
**Arguments for CPD as a practice-led break-out**
**from normative occupational standards in health and social care**

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## Abstract

The newly introduced CPD structures of post-registration training and learning requirements for registered social workers are already under review to examine whether they are 'fit for purpose'. Quite what 'fit' might mean is no clearer than what the 'purpose' of CPD should be in the fast changing world of health and social care services. The theoretical arguments that I will advance in this paper set out to problematise some of the current conceptions of social work CPD. I will maintain that the continuing professional development and education of social workers requires a more fundamental analysis in order that 'people and practices' can be prioritised. This paper will draw upon social theory and psychological constructivist perspectives with arguments being illustrated through reference to policy documents in this field as well as a small empirical study of post-qualification CPD students carried out by the author.

From a social theory perspective, Habermas's ideas of 'knowledge and human interests' (1986) will be used to argue that social work is in danger of losing focus upon its primary *raison d'être* of practice due to continued regulatory attempts to describe and prescribe 'good practice' in the professions. Social work practice, through the 'efficiency and effectiveness' measures of marketisation and managerialism, is increasingly criticised as being driven by targets and outcomes through a modernist search for uniformity, consistency and certainty. Social work education can be argued to have been similarly affected through the advent of competency-based education and training and the introduction of detailed regulatory curriculum frameworks of national occupational standards. This institutional level imposition of 'standards' through practice requirements and evidence indicators are argued in this paper to indicate an increasing colonisation of the professional 'lifeworld' by systems of strategic instrumentalism. Some arguments can be advanced for a minimum competence standard for qualificatory entry to a profession. However, from a post-qualification, continuing education point of view a rigid regulatory approach to CPD is at best irrelevant and at worst undermining of authentic professional learning for practice.

Habermas' social theory level analysis will be complimented, at an individual level, by the psychological constructivism of George Kelly (1991). Perspectives from personal construct psychology will be drawn upon to argue and demonstrate that commitments to lifelong learning arise from communicatively inspired practice lifeworlds. It is in the realm of interpersonal engagement within situated service settings that personal and professional practice creativities can flourish and it is this rich diversity that should be the

starting point for practice-based learning amongst health and social care practitioners. This personalised conception of CPD envisages individuals as a 'locus of integrity'. This means that the individual professional worker recognises their role and responsibility within reflexive processes that link their practices with people to their professional development. Educational arguments from a constructivist dimension will offer a re-visioned focus upon individualisation and the integrity of the individual practitioner and learner as a key source of collaborative definition and direction for pathways of learning and professional development.

## Introduction and literature review

This paper presents a critical contribution to ideas and perspectives through which social work CPD could be re-constructed to offer the potential to become more productive and professionally engaging. It draws upon doctoral research by the author (Cooper 2006) and seeks to problematise some of the current conceptions of CPD. These arguments are equally applicable to other social field professions as the challenges are to the underling rationale for increasingly ubiquitous 'occupational standards'. There are two modes of enquiry and the first acts as a foundation for the architecture of the second. Firstly, a framework of analysis is derived from the ideas of cognitive rationalities or 'human interests' by Habermas (1986). This context serves as an underpinning upon which an original investigation of individual participants' perceptions is developed using a research design drawn from the Personal Construct Psychology methodologies inspired by the pioneering constructivist work of George Kelly (1991).

The emerging structures for CPD in social work are currently called 'Post Registration Training and Learning' [PRTL] (GSCC 2006). PRTL offers two main routes towards meeting both re-registration requirements for a 'licence to practice' as well as CPD obligations in England. Firstly, individuals can create evidence to meet the re-registration requirements for informal 'uncertified' learning and practice development. The minimum requirement to keep 'updated' is to show 'evidence' of 15 days PRTL over three years, in England. This baseline approach is broadly replicated, with some modifications, in other nations of the UK. These are hardly onerous expectations. Secondly, there are formal, 'certified', programmes of post-qualification study leading to higher education awards through HE institutions [HEI's]. These will include far greater expectations and, consequently, offer opportunities for studies at a number of different graduate and post-graduate degree levels. Both of these routes to meeting the PRTL requirements highlight contrasting but also convergent implications for individual practitioners, their employing organisations and HEI's. The interplay of interests between individuals and institutions is an enduring feature of social work CPD and this paper will explore some perspectives upon this relationship.

On the face of things, the PRTL spectrum between uncertified evidence of learning and formal certificated HEI awards appears to meet all needs. And so it may. However, the evidence is giving rise to concerns. So, what is the problem in social work CPD that I am arguing requires a more critical approach? In essence, the problem in the past was that

not enough practitioners were seen to be doing it within the award systems that pre-dated registration of professional title. That problem has not gone away with the recent introduction of regulatory Social Care Councils and so this concern has continued and become a professional issue that, within a regulatory rationale, questions post-registration standards. Since 1997 there have been new Government initiatives to support frameworks of post-qualification CPD for social work and introduce new programmes linked to explicit policy objectives. These have been backed with ring-fenced funds and ambitious targets. However, despite this, the overall figures for PQ award registration and achievement rates remain disappointingly low. The figures were only 12.9% for England [and even lower for the UK as a whole] during the six-year period 1993-1999 (TOPSS 2000). Even though there had been increasing publicity and educational opportunities for CPD, this figure rose only slightly in England to 14.7% in the following four-year period 2000-2003 (GSCC 2004), Annex 1, page 14). Figures for 2004-05 indicate a decline in registrations over the previous year for all specialist PQ awards (GSCC 2005), Appendix 2). Over the period of a decade, little more than 1 in 7 social workers had registered for and achieved a post-qualification award. In the light of an annual workforce turnover rate of approximately 12% the reality may be even worse than this. The outcome figures, however, reflect only one aspect of social work CPD. My experience of working within and across the fields of social work practice and education led me to question the whole rationale that surrounded professional CPD in social work.

CPD has to be about practice. Social work practice is particularly complex and demanding as it operates *both within and across* a number of boundaries linking the operations of the State to the lived experiences of people at some of the most difficult times of their lives. Social work practitioners are not impressed by post-qualification educational opportunities that fail to recognise, validate and positively facilitate these socio-emotional complexities. I have argued elsewhere (Cooper and Broadfoot 2006) that social work practice involves people and subjectivities and cannot be reduced to sets of institutional practice descriptions or prescriptions. I would maintain, therefore, that a critical re-appraisal of social work CPD requires an investigation that examines individual subjectivities and institutional / contextual influences. The work of Jurgen Habermas offers a way of understanding this profound scope between personal agency and social structures. A Habermas inspired critique, therefore, of the systems and lifeworlds of social work CPD could raise the following questions:

Exploratory research question 1
To what extent can the systems and institutions of social work practice and education be understood as being positioned within the Habermas framework of strategic, hermeneutic and emancipatory rationalities?

Exploratory research question 2
Where are social workers, at an individual level, positioned within the Habermas framework of strategic, hermeneutic and emancipatory rationalities?

Exploratory research question 3
Following Habermas, to what extent can it be argued that social work, as a

communicative 'lifeworld', has been 'colonised' by systems of strategic or instrumental rationality?

Exploratory research question 4
To what extent can social work CPD, as a necessary combination of practice and education, be understood as a 'battleground' of competing rationalities and unfamiliar processes of intra-professional assessment?

So, what are the arguments that lead me to propose such a critical investigation of the rationale underpinning CPD? A landmark book in the field, by Houle (1981), predicted that structures of post-qualification and continuing development would grow to rival those of initial, pre-qualification education. Two, more recent, surveys and overviews in Europe and the U.S. (OECD, 1995) (Cervero RM, 2001) over the last 20-25 years have confirmed this vision of growth. However, the writers also make a number of major observations about this development and I shall reproduce four of them here. Firstly, that the field of CPD continues to be characterised by conflict and debate about ways in which CPD should be conceptualised, organised and delivered. Secondly, they chart significant changes in the relationship between the worlds of education and employment. Thirdly, that continuing education is being used more frequently to regulate professional practice. And finally, that the field continues to be in a state of transition with no clear prospect of 'firming up' what forms of CPD may look like for the future. These general themes are equally germane when applied specifically to social work. However, I want to argue here that these observations are important and go so far but need to be taken further.

CPD in social work requires a more critical examination and analysis. Social work is a unique activity invoking complex processes in the realm of 'the social' (Donzelot 1988) where the field of application lay within the relatively uncontrollable and intangible inter-subjective arenas of socio-behavioural phenomena. This recognition of social work being located within social and interpersonal subjectivities calls into question and challenges the nature of knowledge used to explain and inform the practices of social interventions. A critical questioning of the epistemological basis for social work practices leads into the philosophical territory of constructivist approaches to knowledge creation. Bickham (1998) captures the essence of the challenge I am proposing through his assertion that the professions can only survive and thrive through radical reform of structures of CPD where efforts are made to '… break down the epistemological and pedagogical barriers separating knowledge construction and theory from actual professional practice' (73). This argument repeats the case made unequivocally by Rein & White (1981) that

> The knowledge (that social work seeks) *must* be developed in the living situations that are confronted by the contemporary episodes in the field.... it is necessary to enlarge the notion of context to include not only the client's situation but the agency itself and more broadly the institutional setting of practice (37) [original emphasis].

It is interesting to note that, such is the crucial importance of issues surrounding professional CPD, establishment bodies as 'grounded' and mainstream as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development feel obliged to venture into

areas of epistemology.

An OECD report (1995), through a survey of 17 industrialised nations, including the UK, noted a transition in the final quarter of the last century from a focus upon principles of social philosophy such as equity and justice, to a clear recognition and response to what the report describes as 'economic imperatives'. This transition, the report goes on, was occasioned by 'a keenly felt awareness of the rapid and complex question of the obsolescence of knowledge' (16). So what are the complexities of the problem that is accelerating and rendering knowledge 'obsolescent' more quickly? The imperative in the report for acknowledging this issue is clearly related, perhaps understandably given the stable from which it originated, to the effect that this 'obsolescence' may have upon market competitiveness. Nonetheless, this questioning of the nature of knowledge underlines my argument that radical epistemological questions remain to be asked if we are to fully realise the potential for CPD as an influence upon the nature of interventions within social milieus.

In social work, this question of 'the knowledge base' has been particularly contested [see, for a recent example of current debates within the UK, (Parton 2000) (Webb 2001) (Sheldon 2001). The debate shows social work to be 'ahead of the game' of issues addressed by the OECD report (*op.cit.*). A knowledge base for social work is negotiated and developed within and between the interactions of social actors, each of whom possesses human agency and free will. Knowledge of self and others within interactive social situations is therefore constructed rather than received. Within fluid social scenarios, the notion that interpersonal knowledge can become obsolescent is, at best, completely misconceived. In this challenging context, emerging systems of CPD that support and 'professionally develop' social workers are necessarily implicated in these profound questions. The challenge is a philosophical one and the potential of a constructivist approach, as I shall be arguing, offers new perspectives and radical implications.

**Research methodology**

The critical discourse analysis [CDA] approach of Fairclough (1995) was used as an overarching methodology in order bring together the critical social theory insights of Habermas with the personal construct theory and repertory grid methods of Kelly. CDA enabled the examination of issues of power and ideology that underpin the use of language within organisational and individual texts. Fairclough maintains that CDA is not just a mode of analysis but is also 'critical' in having a Habermasian emancipatory knowledge interest (2001). The following table 1 depicts the relationship linking government, institutions and individuals through three different levels of social organisation:

**TABLE 1**
**Discourse analysis: levels of social organisation**

| levels of social organisation | Discourses | discoursal texts | Discourses | levels of social organisation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Societal | | Govt. documents | | Societal |
| Institutional | | Institutional documents and interviews | | Institutional |
| Situational | | Workplace repertory grids and interviews | | Situational |
| Determinants | | . . ←-←-←-←-←-← →→→→→→ | | Effects |

Table adapted from (Fairclough N, 1989, 164)

This framework of analysis was used with a range of documents, which included the Government 'white paper' (Department of Health 1998) that gave rise to the current regulatory and institutional changes, and the regulatory guidance that framed a CPD award in terms of national occupational standards (TOPSS 2000).

The second methodological vehicle was a variation of the repertory grid used in applications of personal construct psychology (PCP) (Stewart 1981) (Beail 1985). PCP has been used extensively in a wide range of research applications in all fields of social life from business to education and, as it was originally devised, within a wide range of clinical applications. Whilst PCP has been used in mainstream education (Pope and Keen 1981) (Pope and Denicolo 2001), there have been few published studies of the use of repertory grid methodology within social work education and none focussing upon the issue of CPD. A PCP methodology accesses participants' views of themselves, how they make sense of their worlds and, therefore, how they make sense of elements of the defined research focus. This approach offered opportunities to gain entrée into the nature of the language used and qualitative inferences to be drawn about the rationalities underpinning the participants' approaches to professional learning. Viney (1988) has characterised this approach to data collection as a 'mutual-orientation model' that is particularly congruent with a constructivist psychology and characterised by two main beliefs; that people are actively trying to make sense of what is happening to them now and to anticipate what will happen to them in the future; and that they have the ability to create their interpretations of their worlds and not just respond to them. The participant is invited to identify and offer their own construct labels, in their own words. This is then used as an idiographic starting point from which to then engage in a reflexive exploration of understanding or 'mutual orientation'.

All units of text from the different sources were coded and assigned, initially, to one of six categories. These categories were structured in two ways to reflect the two main methodological approaches. Firstly, the Habermasian 3-fold rationality framework of 'human interests' was used. This provided an a priori rationality categorisation framework at a sufficiently high level of abstraction to allow for subsequent differentiation and identification of meaning into sub-categories. Secondly, these three categories were each labelled in both positive and negative modes. This identification of both 'presence' and 'absence' reflected the bi-polar nature of the PCP constructs through positive similarities and differences. This bi-polarity is a central feature of the PCP mode of data collection and analysis.

The coding and descriptive formulation for the categories was as follows:

**TABLE 2**
**Rationality categories and descriptors**

SR1    Strategic Rationality - interest in or orientation towards control over objectified systems, processes and procedures

SR2    strategic rationality is also evidenced through language that identifies a <u>loss or absence</u> of control over objectified systems and processes.

HR1    Hermeneutic Rationality - interest in or orientation towards intersubjective understanding: personal and professional

HR2    hermeneutic rationality is also evidenced through language that identifies a lack or absence of an interest or orientation towards intersubjective understanding : interpersonal and interprofessional conflict or alienation

ER1    Emancipatory Rationality - interest in or orientation towards autonomy and responsibility for self and others

ER2    emancipatory rationality is also evidenced through language that identifies a loss or lack of autonomy and responsibility for self and others

**Findings and discussion**

The following are samples from the documentary analysis:

Chapter 5 from 'Modernising Social Services' (Department of Health 1998) focuses specifically upon social work staff training and is entitled "Improving standards in the workforce". Within this document, only five text units were coded outside of a strategic rationality category. Much of the document focuses upon issues of 'governance' and

elaborates upon the importance of institutional change as a driver for a number of strategic changes. It is, therefore, replete with messages about the importance of registration, regulation, enforceable standards and codes of conduct. On a first order reading, the document would appear to be textually homogenous and consistent with its overt message of 'quality through regulation'. However, a more detailed, second-order level of analysis reveals important inconsistencies in the document that reflect the historical and theoretical ambiguities of social work. Once again, these centre upon the conflicting relationship of individual to institution. For example, there is a demand for the delivery of diversity through creative, individualised social work that, at the same time, is expected to take place within a normative network of institutional pressures for regulated consistency.

For example, the document claims that there are 'serious problems' which are identified as a lack of training for 80% of the million-strong social care workforce; a lack of 'national mechanisms to set and enforce standards of practice and conduct'; and a lack of 'general confidence' in the 'standards and suitability of some education and training in social care' (op.cit. 5.3). Having clearly set out the government's strategic system view of 'the problem', there is a brief recognition of the importance of an emancipatory rationality within social work through the individual 'promotion' of the professional values of enabling and independence,

> 5.4 A competent and confident workforce is an essential component of the modernisation of social services. […] All the staff need to play their part in moving social work away from the public perception of an association with dependence to the promotion of independence, and achieving the provision of safer services for children and modern, enabling services for adults.

However, the 'answer' to the problems remains institutional and regulatory. Although apparently clear, the answer is ambiguous and misconceived in its conception of 'the part' that individual staff can play in this reinvigoration of its public perception. Thus,

> 5.5 To give their best, staff will need […]:
> ·        clear definition by employers of their roles and the way they are deployed
> ·        individual objectives related to service objectives

On this view, 'confident and competent' staff can only 'give their best' if employers define their roles and tasks. Moreover, their objectives should be guided not in creative responses to the particularities of individual service users needs, but to the normative demands of service objectives.

This same ambiguity runs through education and CPD as practitioners are expected to demonstrate creativity and criticality within imposed normative frameworks of 'occupational standards'. The regulatory document (TOPSS 2000) clearly states that the standards both 'define […] and describe best practice for social work staff at post-qualifying level' (4). The assumptions underlying this document are of normative control. The standards claim to both define and describe the reality of best practice and so, in order to demonstrate competent best practice and be certificated as having done so,

> ..... candidates must provide their assessor with evidence that they *consistently* meet *all* the performance criteria and *all* aspects of the Range and Knowledge Requirements in *each* of the five units. The evidence requirements in each unit identify activities for which evidence must be produced (op.cit.: 10) [emphasis added].

I have calculated that, to follow this directive, candidates would need to provide a total of 8008 distinct examples of evidence (Cooper 2000). There is no indication from the document that any textual contradiction or ambiguity might be 'read' when this injunction is juxtaposed with an earlier statement extolling individual creativity and maintaining that,

> At this level child care social workers will practice autonomously taking responsibility for their own continuing professional development, and contributing to that of others, within the context of agency accountability (5).

The connections between the critical discourse analysis framework levels of governmental and institutional social organisation are quite explicit in this field. The government set out its modernising case in the white paper and enacted the changes at institutional level through the creation of an employer-led 'first national training organisation', known at that time as the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services [TOPSS]. A publication, issued at the same time as the particular document sampled, appeared to unequivocally reflect the government's intentions to exert maximum regulatory leverage upon the education and training of the social care workforce. It explicitly stated that 'there will be little or no scope for approving qualifications outside of National Occupational Standards-based programmes' (TOPSS 2000), 2.7.1). Thus, the analysis suggests that the underlying rationality and messages from the institutional documentation for social work CPD is of strategic control within a modernist drive for consistency through regulatory standards.

Whereas an analysis of the language elicited through the constructs of social work practitioners engaged in CPD is very different. Seventy bi-polar constructs were elicited from a group of seven social workers. The coding exercise therefore consisted of a data-set of one hundred and forty construct titles.

The relative proportions of the different coding categories for the social workers are illustrated in Fig. 1 below:

**Fig. 1**
**Social worker constructs analysis**



Social worker constructs as coded within Habermas analysis framework
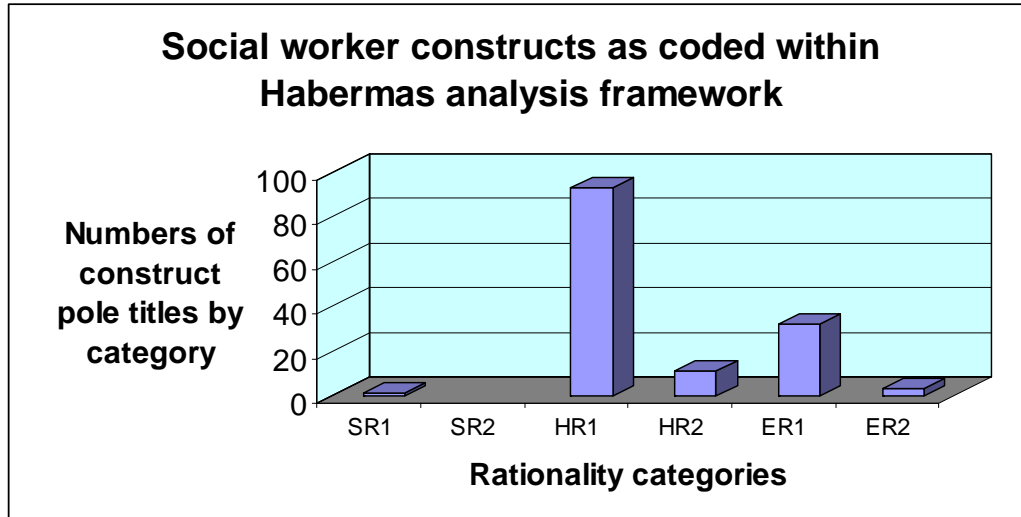
| SR1 | SR2 | HR1 | HR2 | ER1 | ER2 |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1   | 0   | 93  | 11  | 32  | 3   |

The above Fig. 1 illustrates the coding analysis for the social worker constructs. There is a preponderance of hermeneutic constructs with a significant proportion of emancipatory constructs. The ratio between the two categories is almost 3:1. A notable result concerned the minimal evidence of elicited constructs coded as being clearly located within a strategic rationality. There was only one emergent pole of a construct that used the common social work mechanism of 'gate-keeping'. This result was surprising, as although a significant proportion of hermeneutical constructs was expected, it wasn't anticipated that an apparently dominant discourse of instrumentalism would feature quite so minimally within the social workers' constructs.

The individual data results cannot be reified. They are snapshot creations resulting from a particular methodological intervention, with individuals, captured at a moment in time and place. However, the theory of PCP suggests that such creations may be indicative of personal orientations to CPD in social work. These constructs were described in an earlier study in this field (O'Connor and Dalgleish 1986) as 'personal models' of social work. I have argued that an individual's awareness of their own personal constructs or models of social work is a missing element in processes of assessment. It can be seen as a missing piece of the jig-saw in understanding how reflexivity works in the interpersonal processes of social assessments. In professional education in social work, the role of 'personal knowledge' has been argued as being insufficiently emphasised in models of how adult learners develop professional skills and expertise (Eraut 1994) (Taylor 1997). It is this 'conducive' link, between the processes of social work practices and the processes of

continuing professional development that, I have argued (Cooper and Broadfoot 2006), a PCP theory and methodology helps to establish and illustrate.

Three meta-themes emerged through the processes of data collection and analysis. These meta-themes focus upon the irreducible tensions between different perspectives:

1. Competing rationalities of instrumental, hermeneutic and emancipatory interests;
2. The conflicts between individual and institutional interests;
3. The different perspectives emanating from a higher profile of psychological constructivist conceptions of the 'self' within social structures.

The different sources of data tend to exhibit evidence of differentially proportionate emphases according to their 'position' within the hierarchy of institutional and individual interests. However, the data also suggests the identification of a sub-theme of ambiguity or discoursal heterogeneity. The analysis indicated a sub-theme of mixed messages where there is argued to be a value in posing policy messages in such a form that there remains scope for interpretation. At this level of social analysis, a further meta-theme emerges as a core tension between creative and normative influences or a tension between government or societal level drivers and an espoused aim of such drivers to encourage institutional or individual discretion for implementation. The JMC consulting document (2000) put forward the idea that patterns of study need to be more individually tailored in order for them to be more flexibly designed, accessible and reflective of diversity. These proposed principles for pre-qualification practice-based learning could form the basis for similar pathways of PQCPD life-long learning in the workplace. This more individualist proposal within social work education is mirrored through the policy directions for practice suggested by ideas of 'personalisation' (Leadbeater 2004) and the emphasis within the green paper on Adult Care (Department of Health 2005). There may be conflicts, but the interests of individuals and institutions also appear to be mutual. The resolution demands creative engagements with practice and education within a reconstructed CPD.

The construct elicitations and individual interviews offered an opportunity to take a lifeworld-oriented view of individuals. The data was very idiosyncratic and personal to each of the participants. The perspectives, needs, and potentialities of each individual were a feature of the interviews. The data results identified the elements of 'self' as being significant. Analysis suggested that the elements of 'self', present and future, were highly generative on two counts. Firstly, they gave rise to the majority of constructs rated and identified by the principal components analysis as representing highly differentiated perspectives. In the terms of PCP as a theory, these constructs were most meaningful to the participants. Secondly, the elements of self and self in practice were subsequently chosen by participants as being most significant. In other words, the results suggest that individuals, as elements within a practice-based learning context, were both the source and the destination of the most significant constructs. The individual practitioners drew upon themselves and their practice as productive sources of learning and development; but also referred back to themselves as the potentiality of future learning and development.

**Conclusions**

Is social work CPD, as a necessary combination of practice and education, a 'battleground' of competing rationalities? In many ways this question incorporates my feelings over many years, that social workers undertaking post-qualification programmes of CPD were in some kind of struggle. Where I thought they should have been pleased for an opportunity to showcase their extraordinary skills, knowledge and values, they were, in fact, largely resentful of being forced to 'jump through hoops'. Social workers seem to be ideologically 'exposed' on this battleground with an insufficient understanding of the nature of the conflict and inadequate conceptual weaponry to effectively compete. Hence, they are largely reluctant to enter the fray. When they do so, large numbers struggle to be educationally engaged by the instrumental demands of regulatory requirements. To adequately challenge and critique the current 'received wisdom' they need to be 'map-makers' and not just 'map-readers' (Lester 1999). An understanding of the power of discursive formations would help put the language of 'requirements' in proper perspective. They offer a map, but more to the point someone else's map, that is unlikely to help negotiate the territory. An understanding of how individual and interpersonal engagements actually construct maps of meaning within the unique territory of situated creativity would help raise the self-esteem and status potential of each social worker. Taken together, an understanding of how systems and lifeworlds are not just connected but reflexively constituent of each other would certainly help social workers to survive, if not thrive, on the front-line in the domains of 'the social'.

I have described my conception of individuals as a 'locus of integrity'. Within a 'conducive' notion of individualisation in social work CPD, this means that the individual social worker recognises their role and responsibility within reflexive processes that link their practice to their professional development. Conducive assessment becomes a cohering principle through a psychological constructivist dimension where the re-visioned focus upon individualisation starts from the integrity of the individual practitioner and learner as a key source of definition. A conducive assessment approach focuses upon the personal, agency-initiated, reflexivity of individuals as well as their relationships. This reflexivity takes place within a situated socio-cultural context that is particular to time and place. The 'situated creativity' that this gives rise to can be argued to constitute the 'core curriculum' for social workers. This is a dynamic, creative, personal responsibility approach to an individualised, practice-inspired curriculum. It is a long way from the reductionist, prescriptive schedules of occupational standards and the first step towards a practice-led break-out.

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