



SOCIAL WORK: WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

Jan Fook

Dalhousie University

Reflections on experience... ..

My own background in critical reflection... ..

- Hearing about practice experiences
- Fitting our own experience in with other's definitions
- The problematics of this
- ***Therefore the need to celebrate social work in our own terms***

Lisa's experience.....

- Community health setting
- Situation of mother chasing toddler around the room
- Lisa's distress in interfering

What did the critical reflection reveal?

- **For Lisa**

- *Judgement of herself for not stopping the abuse*
- *Re-affirmation of structural social work*
- *Discrepancy between structural analysis and own feelings of trauma*



- **For me:**

- Struck by type of situation

- Lisa's judgement of herself

- Lisa's self denial

- Difficulty in using theory to help with practice

Gail's experience... ..

- Student on placement
- Concern with his performance (and values)
- Her own distress at this
 - “(...*.but I swore at him*)”

What I have learnt form critical reflection with colleagues.....

- The humbling nature of social work experiences
- The place of values and emotions?
- Therefore the complex and integrated nature of experience...
(values, actions, emotions, theories...)

Therefore the need to:

- Articulate and validate the experience of practice...
- Learn from and make meaning of experience (combining different knowledges, values, skills)... ..
- Reaffirm fundamental values... ..
- Find a place for integrity (combining values and actions)... ..

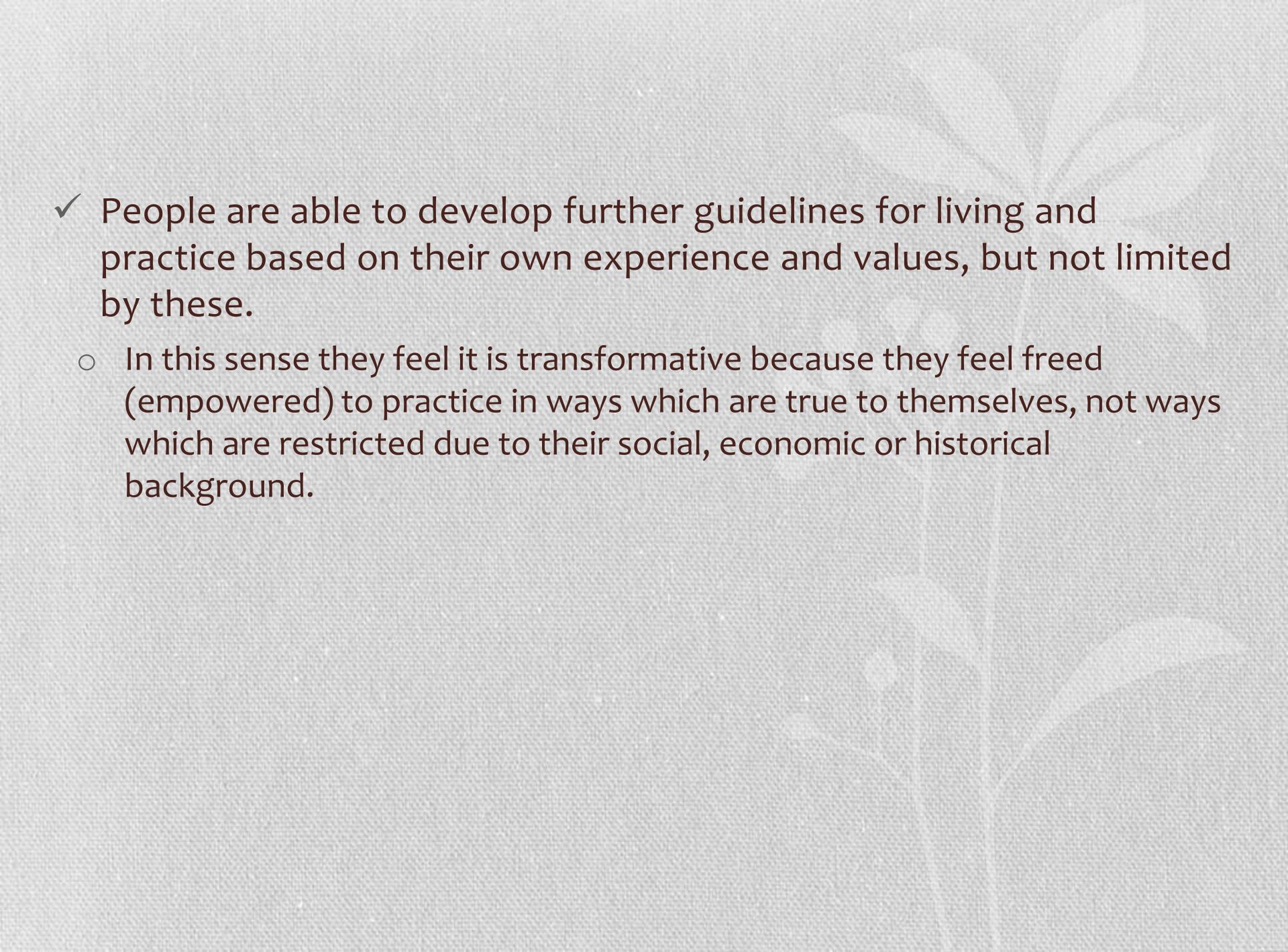
What is critical reflection

- ◆ Learning from/making meaning of experience (eg. Dewey, Boud, Mezirow)
- ◆ Process of unearthing deeper assumptions (eg. Schon)
- ◆ What makes it critical – unearthing fundamental (dominant) assumptions about power– “ideology critique” (eg. Brookfield) which enables change (“transformation”)

- Critical reflection involves both:
 - a theoretical framework and
 - a structured process
- It aims to unsettle taken for granted thinking and expose it to scrutiny.....
(stage 1)
- In order to change it (and subsequent actions) if necessary
(stage 2)

What happens in a critical reflection process?

- ✓ Examining and reworking fundamental assumptions allows a remaking of a cohesive bedrock of values which underpins much of life's activities.
 - In this sense the reflection is relevant to both personal and professional life and can act as a re-energize.
 - This re-affirms values which are important regardless of context and times.
- ✓ A simple process of unearthing assumptions can turn into an integration of (past) experiences into a coherent sense of self.
 - This allows for an (almost therapeutic) remaking of identity to incorporate discrepant experiences (but also allows for present experiences to be “freed” from inappropriate generalizations from past contexts).

- 
- ✓ People are able to develop further guidelines for living and practice based on their own experience and values, but not limited by these.
 - In this sense they feel it is transformative because they feel freed (empowered) to practice in ways which are true to themselves, not ways which are restricted due to their social, economic or historical background.

Theories involved

- **Reflective practice** – the gap between theory and practice (eg. Schon)
- **Postmodernism/deconstruction/the linguistic turn** – how our language/discourse constructs our knowledge
- **Reflexivity** – how who we are (socially and personally) constructs our knowledge (eg. Taylor and White)
- **Critical perspectives** – how personal experience is linked with social arrangements, and how social aware
- **Spirituality** – how a sense of greater meaning can underpin what we do

The basic critical reflection process

- Focuses on:
 - Specific instances of practice experience (critical incidents)
 - To unsettle (dominant) implicit assumptions (stage 1)
 - In order to discover and change relevant thinking and practices (stage 2) (and names the experience in the person's own terms)
 - Uses critical reflective questions derived from theories
 - May be used in a number of ways (eg. Small groups, self-reflection)
 - In an ethical learning climate (“critical acceptance” – non-judgemental, open but safe; focus on understanding not finding solutions)

An example....

- **Barbara....(stage 1)**
- ❖ A social worker/manager in a large government income security bureaucracy
- ❖ Incident from personal life – she intervenes between 2 men in angry argument
- ❖ Didn't want to be a 'control freak'
- ❖ Assumptions about control, someone needing to be in control, and equated with the need for action
- ❖ Reflected on her own needs to be in control and assumptions about good professional practice equated with need to take action

• **Fear of uncertainty?**

Between stages 1 & 2.....

Emotions and assumptions come together in the experience.....

Caught herself telling a staff member that he needed to “stay with the uncertainty”

Barbara stage 2

- Therefore a need to construct her desired practice as “being powerful in uncertainty” or “structured uncertainty” (her words from her initial reflection)
- How would she do this? (Connecting the theory and the practice) She spoke of creating her own “emotional scaffolding” to help her in new situations

What have we learnt about social work practice?

- ✓ Complex – many different and conflicting interests
- ✓ Uncertain – changeable, unpredictable, uncontrollable, contextual
- ✓ Holistic – integrates many different aspects, can't be fragmented
- ✓ Value-based
- ✓ Commitment to better outcomes

What's good about social work?

- Simple solutions to complex problems
- Relates to people as whole people
- Preserves human experience as a basis for practice
- Embodies the commitment and ability to act decisively and justly in uncontrollable circumstances

What do we need to do in order to keep it that way?

- Framing our experience in **OUR** terms (by recognising the complexity and naming it) thus handling incongruity and contradiction
- Framing the experience in a way it can be acted upon (allows integrity and connection of theory, values and practice)
- Connecting emotions and assumptions and actions (positive/creative use of emotion - emotions are more than phenomena to be contained or resolved)
- Giving meaning to our experiences (putting it into a framework which is relevant to other experiences)
- Creating practice theory or knowledge directly from experience itself – the ability to work with uncertainty (gives an authenticity and responsiveness to practice and allows us to constantly test and revise our theory in the light of ongoing practice)