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Constructive Social Work: Philosophical Roots and Practice Principles

By Nigel Parton and Patrick O'Byrne

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the central principals and tenets of an approach to social work we call *Constructive Social Work (CSW)* (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). In doing so we locate the approach in a range of cultural, political and theoretical developments which have become increasingly evident over the last thirty years associated with postmodernism and social constructionism. Since the early 1990s postmodern and social constructionist perspectives have been drawn upon to think about, analyse and directly contribute to social work practice (see, for example, Howe, 1994; Parton 1994; Hall, 1997; Leonard, 1997; Meinert et al., 1998; Chambon et al., 1999; Jokinen et al., 1999; Pease and Fook, 1999; Fawcett et al., 2000; Healy, 2000; Taylor and White, 2000). Since writing *CSW* we have developed the ideas in a variety of ways. For example we have discussed *CSW* in relation to *the feminist ethics of care* (Parton, 2003); its relationship with *personal construct theory* and *psychological trauma* (Butt and Parton, 2005); in the context of *child protection* (Teoh et al, 2003); with *work with offenders* (Gorman et al, 2006); and its use in *assessment in social work* more generally (Milner and O'Byrne, 2009). The first part of this chapter has been developed from an earlier paper by one of the authors (Parton, 2009).

In many respects, the starting point was the recognition that social work had been experiencing a major period of change and uncertainty in its organisation and day-to-day practice such that it seemed qualitatively different from what went before, thus requiring new skills and new forms of knowledge in order to practise. Social work's engagement with postmodern and constructionist perspectives is a recognition that these changes and experiences are not particular to social work but reflect much wider transformations in Western societies. The significance of postmodern perspectives is that they draw attention to a number of areas of social transformation in terms of:

- the increasing pace of change;

- the emergence of new complexities and forms of fragmentation;
- the growing significance of difference, plurality and various political movements and strategies, and the pervasive awareness of relativities;
- the opening up of individual 'choice' and 'freedom'; and
- the increasing awareness of the socially constructed nature of existence.

Perhaps most centrally, such perspectives have reactivated a question which has lain dormant in social theory for many years but which touches the heart of much social work – what kinds of human being have we become (Rose, 1996)?

At the outset, however, it is important to recognise that the term 'postmodern' has been hotly contested so that it is almost impossible to impose, by definitional fiat, an agreed set of terms for the debates (Turner, 1990). While the primary concern has been to consider how far and in what ways 'current times' are different from what has gone before, a number of commentators have argued that it is inappropriate to periodise history in this way (Heelas et al., 1996), that the changes and breaks have been exaggerated (Clark, 1996) and that, rather than characterise the present in terms of the postmodern, it is better characterised as high or late modern (Giddens, 1990, 1991). We have previously argued that postmodern interpretations are in danger of not taking the situation of actually living human actors sufficiently seriously (Parton, 1998). Even so, the debates provide an important vehicle for developing our insights into the nature of the contemporary complexities, uncertainties and experiences, and for opening up new and creative ways of thinking and acting.

Certainly, reference to the postmodern is much older than the recent fashion in social theory might suggest and in art history and aesthetic theory goes back many years (Featherstone, 1988). The term 'postmodernism' was first used in the 1930s but became increasingly used in the areas of literature, architecture, philosophy and the arts more generally from the 1960s onwards (Turner, 1990; Smart, 1999). The perspective came to particular prominence with the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in 1984. While perhaps 'postmodern' perspectives are united by a number of cultural projects which claim a commitment to heterogeneity,

fragmentation and difference, it is perhaps their critiques of modernity which have proved most influential but contentious.

Modernity as a summary term is seen to refer to the cluster of social, economic and political systems which emerged in the West with the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century. Unlike the premodern, modernity assumed that human order is neither natural nor God-given, but is vulnerable and contingent. However, by the development and application of science, nature could be subject to human control. The distinguishing features of modernity are seen to be: the understanding of history as having a definite and progressive direction; the attempt to develop universal categories of experience; the idea that reason can provide a basis for all activities and that the nation state could coordinate and advance such developments for the whole society. The guiding principle of modernity is the search to establish reliable foundations for knowledge. It aims to identify central truths about the world but also assumes that truth does not reside on the surface of things but is hidden by appearances. The two crucial elements of modernity in the post-Enlightenment period were thus seen as the progressive union of scientific objectivity and politico-economic rationality (Parton, 1994b).

In the modern 'frame' the goal is to produce knowledge about a chosen aspect of the physical or social world by which we can claim greater certainty. At that point we can confer a sense of truth about that knowledge, and also confer on the people producing knowledge (for example scientists or professionals) the status of holder-of-truth and expert about that aspect of the world. In short, the modernist equation is:

external reality – objective knowledge – certainty about that knowledge – claim to truth – expert status given to holder-of-truth/knowledge. Modernist truth is indeed bound to certainty, external reality and objective knowledge for modernism both relies on (and produces) a clear splitting of the subject who wants to know and the object which is being observed for knowledge and truth. (Flaskas, 1997: 5, original emphasis)

Yet, despite advances in medicine, media and technology, there is an increasing recognition that we now inhabit a world which has become disorientated, disturbed and subject to doubt. The pursuit of order and control, the promotion of calculability, belief in progress, science and rationality and other features which were so intrinsic to modernity

are being undermined by a simultaneous range of unsettling conditions and experiences. In part this is related to the major social, economic and cultural transformations that have characterised recent times in terms of:

- globalisation;
- the increasing significance of the media and the widening networks of information technology, which transform and transmit knowledge;
- the changes in modes of consumption and production;
- the increased awareness of risk and uncertainty and
- a greater emphasis on choice.

Social work and the postmodern

Howe (1994) has usefully outlined the possible significance of such debates for social work. His central argument is that, if social work was a child of modernity, it now finds itself in a world uncertain of whether or not there are any deep and unwavering principles which define the essence of its character and hold it together as a coherent enterprise.

He suggests that not only can the emergence of social work from the mid-nineteenth century onwards be seen as a particular manifestation of the development of the modern, but also that the three traditional cornerstones of social work – care, control and cure – can be seen as particular manifestations of modernity's three great projects that:

in its own way social work has pursued the beautiful (aesthetics), the good (ethics) and the true (science) as it attempts to bring about a pleasing quality of life and a just society by using the insights of the social sciences. (Howe, 1994: 518)

However, Howe argues that contemporary social work is, in many respects, experiencing a number of features which have been characterised as symptomatic of the postmodern condition. Modernism's promise to deliver order, certainty and security has been unfulfilled, and it is increasingly felt that there are no transcendental universal criteria of truth (science), judgement (ethics) and taste (aesthetics). The overriding belief

in reason and rationality is disappearing as there is a collapse of consensus related to the 'grand narratives' and their articulation of progress, emancipation and perfection, and what constitutes the centres of authority and truth. The rejection of the idea that any one theory or system of belief can ever reveal the truth, and the emphasis on the plurality of truth and 'the will to truth', captures some of the essential elements associated with postmodern approaches.

Truth takes the guise of 'truth' centred neither in God's word (as in the premodern) nor in human reason (as in the modern), but is decentred and localised so that many 'truths' are possible, dependent on different times and places. Notions of 'truth' are thus related to context and are culture-specific so that there is a refusal to accept that some groups have a monopoly on what constitutes truth, beauty and the good. Relativities, uncertainties and contingencies are no longer seen as marginal and problems to be overcome as yet beyond the reach of reason, but as central and pervasive. In fact, the modern approach, rather than being humanitarian, progressive and emancipatory, is seen as invariably exploitative and repressive because of its failure to recognise difference and its reliance on totalising belief systems.

The importance of discourse and language

These developments have contributed to new ways of understanding the self in context which question the central assumptions of human nature and models of the person encoded in professional knowledge and derived from the modernist projects of sociology and psychology. Language is seen as central:

An understanding of the part that language plays in the formation of human selves, human thought and human subjectivity underpins the postmodern perspective.

(Howe, 1994: 521)

Instead of being described as a tool that simply reflects objects, language is seen as mediating and constituting all that is 'known'. Reality is not just obtrusive, but is also embedded within interpretation and 'language games' (Lyotard, 1984), so that 'truth' is a product of language and exchanging words. We cannot transcend the influence of interpretation and assume that reality is simply waiting to be discovered; it is constituted and constructed within and by language/words. Here, the notion of discourse becomes key, for while such approaches give particular weight to the linguistically constituted

character of reality, they do not mean that discourses are 'mere words'. To understand an individual, one needs to listen to their story of themselves, and the words used to construct it; language – discourse. Discourses are structures of knowledge claims and practices through which we understand, explain and decide things. In constituting people as agents, they also define obligations and determine the distribution of responsibilities and authorities for different categories of person, such as parents, children, social workers, doctors, lawyers and so on. A discourse is best understood as a system of possibilities for knowledge and agency which makes some actions possible while precluding others. Of course, agency brings with it accountability. Many service user stories lack accountability or a full sense of agency; these factors become a focus of intervention.

Thus, whereas modernity assumes that increasing knowledge of the real world produces power, postmodernity reverses the formula, recognising that the formation of particular discourses creates contingent centres of power which define areas of knowledge and truth claims. Those with power can influence language and discourse and can therefore influence the way in which life is experienced, interpreted and spun. Those lacking power can be made to feel fatalistic and devoid of accountability, lacking in self agency, with some reacting in destructive ways. As we argue later, unless the oppressive/exploitive versions of life are deconstructed powerful societal attitudes restrain people from resisting the problems or from taking responsibility in various ways. However, because there is a range of different contexts, cultures and discourses available at any one time and place, there is also a plethora of different meanings, knowledges and truths available and many experiences and interpretations of self and identity. Notions of plurality and difference are widespread. Thus we should proceed on the recognition that language does not simply reflect or mirror objects, events and categories existing in the social and natural world – it actively *constructs those* things. Words do not simply describe things, *they do* things and thus have social and political implications. Social work is being invited to find new ways of using words to empower lives, to safeguard and support, to bring good futures into view.

Indeed, as we work on a daily basis with individuals and families, safeguarding the vulnerable, seeking to improve parenting, supporting older people, resettling offenders or helping those with mental health problems, *language is our main tool* for bringing about results – helping people make images of the ‘good life’ they desire and developing a sense of self-agency and responsibility-taking so that their potential is mobilised. While we mobilise external resources when necessary, we mobilise internal resources by talking words with every person to collaborate with them in their escape from problem-saturated stories and in their entry into solution-land. Our conversations co-author (co-construct) self-agency, self-responsibility and different futures.

Implications for practice

Postmodern perspectives have been criticised for seeming to neglect the salience of issues of inequality in a simple celebration of difference, for being overly relativistic, nihilistic, negativistic and anarchistic, and for not taking heed of the positive and progressive elements that have previously gone on under the umbrella of social work (Smith and White, 1997). We agree that social work ought to be wary of extreme relativism and scepticism, for it is essentially a practice where decisions have to be made and practitioners have to act and make up their minds, while being open minded and reflexive, yet confident enough to intervene.

In this respect, Rosenau (1992) provides an important contribution in characterising postmodern perspectives along a continuum from the *sceptic* to the *affirmative* postmodernist. The emphasis of the affirmative postmodernist on ‘truth redefinition’ rather than ‘truth denying’ is potentially much more suggestive of social work. Rosenau’s interpretation of an affirmative postmodern vision demonstrates that, while it cannot offer truth, it is not without rich content. It is interpretative and its focus is receptivity, dialogue, listening to and talking with the other. It reveals paradox, myth and enigma, and it persuades by showing, reminding, hinting and evoking rather than by constructing theories and approximating truth. It is suggested that our focus should be narrative, fragmented fantasies and different stories. Social work takes on the guise of persuasive story-telling or poetry. deShazer (1994) spoke of it as Jazz, with worker and service user improvising possibilities, building on each other’s language.

What such an approach demonstrates is that postmodern perspectives are not necessarily bleak or anti-social work but provide novel and creative insights that clearly speak to a number of themes and approaches which have been associated with social work for much of its history, such as seeking to engage with a service user's world and **fostering self-determination**. It almost suggests that social work could be (re)interpreted as being postmodern all along. Many social workers will identify with approaches which blur the difference between fact and story (England, 1986), and which take the view that what an individual perceives or experiences as her or his reality is *the* reality, but a reality capable of change in an endless variety of ways. When people are helped to realise their self-agency, they are empowered to select and reach their goals creatively. Social workers can again be 'word-smiths', skilled in the use of language and conversation to co-construct solutions, personal change in outlook and new options for action.

There are now a number of attempts to develop and apply the positive elements of such an approach explicitly to social work practice. In the process, a number of themes and issues are illustrated which are of wide application and which can be developed further in different contexts. *Uncertainty* is seen as central, for, as Pozatek (1994: 399) suggests, 'the acknowledgement of uncertainty is an essential element of the postmodern practice of social work' and such a position can push workers to make the effort to understand a service user's experience. A position of uncertainty is seen to represent a more respectful approach to cultural difference, as certainty and objectivity are an illusion. Social workers should not expect, therefore, to know in advance what the outcomes of interactions will be. They can, at best, only trigger an effect. A position of uncertainty means that social workers will approach each situation respectful of difference, complexity and ambiguity, and respectful of people's solution building potential.

Words are understood by clients according to how they have constructed the reality embodied in the interaction. It is thus essential for practitioners to be aware of this and construct, through *dialogue* with the client, a shared understanding and reality which they agree is a representation of their interaction. It is an approach which recognises

that *language* is crucial for constituting the experiences and identity of both the self and the interaction, and which takes seriously the diverse elements of power involved. It is similarly serious about notions of *partnership* and *participation* which potentially enables the views of service users to be prioritised. This is not to say, however, that such issues are self-evident and clear cut. A commitment to *uncertainty*, *indeterminacy* and *unpredictability* will reinforce social workers' continual attempts *reflexively* to consider what they are doing, why and with what possible outcomes.

Sands and Nuccio (1992) have similarly identified a number of themes central to postmodern perspectives which can be drawn on in practice. Thus, rather than think and act according to logocentrism, which assumes that there is a singular fixed logical order which is 'real' or 'true', practitioners need to recognise that there are no essential meanings. Definitions and interpretations, including 'violent', 'neglectful', 'addicted' and many diagnostic labels, are historically contingent and context bound and hence fluid. Similarly, logocentric thought promotes thinking in terms of binary opposites – male/female, black/white, adult/child, true/false, – which are seen as mutually exclusive, categorical and hierarchical rather than interdependent. Such categories are usually embedded in language in a way which privileges some experiences and marginalises others. It is thus important explicitly to recognise the important, but fluid and changing nature of *difference* so that the oppressed and devalued can have a voice and we can think and act in terms of both/and *relational* terms. We can avoid thinking of a person as either depressed or not depressed (for example), as though depression was like electricity which is turned either ON or OFF. Many 'either/ors' are now seen as spectra, hence the value of using scales such as 1 to 10.

One way to recover suppressed meaning is through the key postmodern operation of *deconstruction* whereby phenomena are continually interrogated, evaluated, overturned and disrupted. Deconstruction is a way of analysing texts, language and narratives that is sensitive to contextual dimensions and marginalised voices. The process of deconstruction recognises that, while *multiple discourses* might be available, only a few are heard and are dominant, these being intimately related to the dominant powers/knowledges. When one deconstructs,

one does not accept the constructs as given but looks at them in relation to their social, historical and political contexts. Constructs are 'problematized' and 'decentred'. Through deconstruction, the presumed fixity of phenomena is destabilised, and the perspective of the marginalised can be given voice. It involves, among other things, helping people to externalise the problem, examining its influences on their life, reconstructing and liberating themselves from it.

Dominant narratives have oppressive effects on people's understanding of the validity of their ways of living. White (1995) argues that there isn't a single story of life which is free of ambiguity and contradiction and that can handle all the contingencies of life. He maintains that deconstructing the problem is done by reflecting with service users how they came to be recruited, for a time, into a *problem-saturated story*. He then asks questions like:

Does it really suit you to be dominated by it?

Given a choice between life with the problem and life free of the problem, which do you choose?

What does that (the latter) say about your ability to undermine the problem and break free from it?

The notion of *possibility* (O'Hanlon and Beadle, 1994) recognises that things can be changed. A vision of possibility can be used to mobilise people's potential and competence, and can empower them to reclaim and redefine who they are and how they want to act. We can have conversations with service users, looking not only at how problems influence their lives but also at how they can influence the life of the problem. A narrative approach challenges people's beliefs that a problem speaks their identity (having a totalising effect which conflates the person with the problem), seeking to separate the person and the problem and develop a sense of incongruity between the two that opens up new possibilities for responsibility taking.

However, we should not assume that postmodern perspectives are concerned with giving suppressed subjects a voice in any simple way. The notion of *subjectivity* is itself complex. While, within a logocentric tradition, the individual is autonomous

and (if healthy) integrated and has an essential subjectivity, identity, personality, this is not the case with postmodern perspectives. In the latter, subjectivity is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourses. Accordingly, the subject is multifaceted and speaks in many voices, depending on the sociocultural, historical and interpersonal contexts in which it is situated. It is perhaps the emphasis on language and its intimate relationship with knowledge and power which provides the most distinctive message for practice arising from postmodern perspectives. A focus on social work as text, narrative and artistry, as opposed to social work as science, moves centre stage. Whereas science looks for explanations and causes, the story or narrative approach is intent on finding a *meaningful* account. As Howe (1993) has demonstrated, via his in-depth analysis of studies of what clients say about what they value from counselling and therapy, it is the latter which is important. Talking not only helps people to understand their experiences, but also allows them to control, reframe and move on from problem-saturated stories, as we help them re-author their best selves. Such approaches emphasise *process* and *authorship*. An open-minded engagement with people's stories and the possibility of helping them to re-author their lives using more helpful stories can be both an empowering and respectful way of understanding situations and bringing about change. The approach clarifies partnership without neglecting responsibility taking and, by highlighting service users' local knowledge, has the capacity to produce individual assessments and interventions which have real meaning for service users.

Constructive Social Work

These ideas have been built upon in terms of our development of *Constructive Social Work* (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). The term 'constructive social work' was chosen for two reasons: first, to demonstrate a positive, strengths-based approach; and, second, to reflect the postmodern, discourse and social constructionist theoretical perspectives which inform it. The *constructive* approach emphasises process, plurality of both knowledge and voice, possibility and the relational quality of knowledge. It is affirmative and reflexive and focuses on dialogue, listening to and talking with the other. Social work practice is seen as a specialised version of the process by which people define themselves, participate in their social worlds, and cooperatively construct social realities.

It underlines both the shared building of identity and meaning that is the basis of effective practice, and the positive results for service users that stem from the approach. It is not easy – it calls for pains-taking slow work at the beginning to engage people in the change project, but many workers report that it is less stressful.

Constructive Social Work is concerned with the narratives of solutions to problems, and with change; instead of providing the practitioner with information about the causes of problems, so that she or he can make an expert assessment and prescribe a 'scientific' solution, the service user is encouraged to tell the *story* of the problem in a way that *externalises* it, giving more control and agency and creating a new perspective on how to manage or overcome it. These *narratives* construct the future and anticipate change; questions encourage the service user to identify *exceptions* to the apparently overwhelming nature of problems – occasions when the problem was less serious or where she or he has done something that made a positive difference. *Constructive Social Work* develops techniques and thinking associated with 'solution-focused' (de Shazer, 1985, 1991, 1994; Miller, 1997), 'narrative' (White and Epston, 1990; White, 1993), 'possibility' (O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis, 1989; O'Hanlon, 1993; O'Hanlon and Beadle, 1994) and the 'strengths' (Saleebey, 1997) perspectives. The approach attempts to provide questions which elicit clear goals about what the service user wants, in their own words, and which involves her or him in doing something in the immediate future which can launch a new beginning. The practitioner's mode of address is one of 'curiosity and respectful puzzlement' (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000) at the service user's unique way of making things better, rather than expertise in fitting an intervention to a need. Service users are encouraged to not only scale their problems but also their progress, to repeat successes, to identify solutions as theirs, and as steps to the achievement of their own goals. Service users are invited to tell their stories using the cultural resources of their communities – local language and interpretation of the problem and the origins of their oppression and exclusion.

Drawing on the work of White, deShazer and the other authors mentioned above, the language of oppression, domination, subjugation, enslavement and recruitment is used in order to try and establish how the problem is dominating the person. The

service user is then encouraged to distance herself or himself from the problem and to give it an unpleasant name, using their own metaphors. It can then be 'externalised' and 'politicised' in terms of the forces operating against empowerment and achievement in society, in terms of style, appearance, class, gender, race, ability, family relationships or whatever. Service users can be asked how did it seduce them into allowing it into their life? Then, to elicit strengths, they can be asked questions like: have you sometimes resisted the influence of the problem; in what ways have you been able to undermine it? What resources were you able to (or can be) marshalled to defeat the problem? This conversation can elicit courage and heroism in the face of severe difficulties. People can be asked - what do these examples of resistance say about them as people, and how capable they are. They can then be encouraged to tell others about all this, thus expanding and strengthening the new narrative.

O'Hanlon places great value also on questioning the relationship the person has with the problem, reviewing not only the 'doing' but also the 'viewing'. This 'viewing' often comprises of 'problematic stories such as:

- 'impossibility ideas' – "I can't do..."
- 'blaming thoughts' (e.g. attributing bad intentions or bad traits) – "She is attention seeking".
- Invalidation stories – "He is silly". "She is over sensitive". "I shouldn't be feeling this way"
- 'non-accountability-for actions' stories – "I can't help it, it's how I am".

These 'stories' are sometimes at the heart of the problem and need to be externalised and weakened with the 'possibility virus'. Blame is to be distinguished from responsibility/accountability. The former refers to the past, the latter to the future, starting from now. The approach aims to defeat the stereotypes of the blaming official organisations, and offers service users new ways of giving an account of their situation in which their self-agency and responsibility-taking become central, and people begin to take control. Because the worker is with the person, against the problem, conflict between the practitioner and the service user is less likely and this prepares the ground for cooperation in trying to reduce the influence of the problem, and constructing possibilities and solutions. None of this reduces the accountability for avoidable mistakes, offences or the abuse of others, although it may challenge beliefs about more fundamental issues of self-worth and potential for change. Thus, a key aspect of the approach is that it encourages service users to retell their stories in terms of courageous opposition to their disadvantages and heroic resistance to their problems.

In the context of child protection workers must put the needs of the vulnerable first, but in dealing with risk Turnell and Edwards (1999) draw on solution focussed ideas and show that by looking for 'signs of safety' as well as signs of danger, one is more likely to engage with parents or families. Increasing signs of safety is more constructive than trying to eliminate all risk and it is also easier for people to attempt, for example when they are seeking to get a child back from state 'care'. The very language 'signs of safety' changes the interaction with the parent and moves the work from arguments about risk to finding creative constructive ways of making the changes necessary, improving parenting and allowing worried workers to close the case. The approach emphasises identifying existing indicators of safety, which are measurable. It develops these indicators and expands them so that a safe care plan can be put in place. The service user is helped to do this, but is held responsible for their behaviour in the future. It is seen as more helpful to emphasise 'doing safety' than stopping danger – it is impossible to be sure when the latter is achieved and it is more difficult to work with and not imply blame or deficit, thus losing the necessary collaborative feel and shared responsibility.

Turnell and Edwards focus on the goals of all the people involved to ensure the safety of those most vulnerable. They make it the responsibility of the suspected

offender, with help from the worker and others, to devise a safety plan that will ensure the dual safety demands, i.e. the protection of the vulnerable from harm and the protection of the offender from accusations. Families can be asked “what will you and others be doing that is different so that the statutory service is confident enough to close the case?” The use of safety-scaling questions makes it possible for people to acknowledge when they are not making sufficient progress without making them feel like complete failures. Their willingness, confidence and capacity to change can also be scaled. Although it is important for offenders to take responsibility for their behaviour in the future, Turnell and Edwards make the point that practitioners have a responsibility for setting the scene so that motivation can be improved. However where parents, having been helped, are unable to build sufficient safety to eliminate serious risk legal measures need to be put in place.

Practice principles of *Constructive Social Work*

We offer these principles of constructive social work which flow from constructionist ideas and which have been developed through practice, for practice. They have been expressed in various ways; they are part philosophical assumptions (Myers, 2007) and part first principles of practice (Parton and O’Byrne 2000, chaps 5- 6; Milner and O’Byrne, 2009, chaps 8 and 9). The assumptions and the principles (practice methods) overlap. We think that any theoretic social work approach is only as valuable as its operationalisation in the field, and the following is a selection of our favoured ways of achieving this as constructive social workers.

Philosophical assumptions:

In this approach *the problem* is the problem; the service user is not seen as the problem, and the problem is not necessarily an indication of personal deficit. Complicated problems do not always require complicated solutions. Problems are seen as due to restraints that inhibit responsibility-taking and self-agency, or as simply ‘just happening’. Searching for causation, therefore, can be avoided and

the past is of interest mainly for exploring strengths and exceptions to the problem - occasions when the problem was less, or resisted. Seeking to understand past problems tends to lead to blame for the past, whereas the goal is to develop responsibility for the future. Exploring a problem-free future avoids having to dwell on the past. The problem is already constructed; what matters is understanding and constructing the solution.

Solution implies change, and change is difference. Change can be seen as the conversational creation of a new narrative that can 'dis-solve' a problem-saturated story to make a difference. We can define power as knowing that what we do makes a difference – but a difference that is not recognised makes no difference. By recognising and talking about differences, such as occasions when the person coped better, we put them to work to make a difference. Exceptions to the problem are seen as the beginning of resistance to it and to its influence. Where problems are felt to be overwhelming, the location of strengths and exceptions is particularly important. Change is always happening and is inevitable and constant, as ideas, meanings and language constantly change human action “imposing constraints and possibilities on human actors” (Parton 2008). The only constant is change.

This approach says that, as workers seeking to move matters forward, all we have is the present conversation, so there is a disciplined approach to *talking*. Talking amplifies what is talked about, therefore it is best to talk of exceptions, of the future and of possibilities. Talking from a *not-knowing* stance towards the future reduces premature and imposed ideas and judgements by the worker. Staying on the surface of conversations and events, rather than looking beneath, avoids arriving at a meaning which is likely to be the worker's own interpretation. Good listening is essential for good talking; it gives us space to experience and make sense of people's worlds/realities in different ways, while spotting the exceptions and abilities, and it shows how much we are thinking about the person, reaching for shared meanings and for new ways by which the person might wish to amplify their successes/abilities, to start making progress.

Because many service users become identified with the problem (“I *am* an addict”) it is important to avoid this by seeing and discussing the problem as external to the

person. It is easier to think about standing-up to something that is external to one's self.

Solutions are seen in terms of words and actions that will be *noticed* when the problem is gone. Solutions are not merely the absence of problems. They are seen as only nominally linked to the problem, as they may mean arriving at something different from the initial goal. So the emphasis is on understanding what people will be doing and saying when the problem is removed or reduced. Solution ideas generated by the service user are more likely to be meaningful, achievable and successful. This approach is more interested in the 'local' knowledge of people rather than the wider theories of professionals.

Some principles for practice skills

While constructive social work is primarily a philosophy rather than a set of techniques, the following are examples of practical ways for developing constructive questions that elicit strengths, exceptions, abilities and possibilities for a different way of viewing and doing. These questions empower and invite people to story and construct better lives. One usually begins by identifying, or showing interest in, *what is going right* rather than what is going wrong; what is right about a person's life can mend what is wrong. It is important therefore to take time to find exceptions to problems as they are seen as clues to how to do the future differently. We also ask *how* the person has managed to achieve the exceptions or get something to work for them, thereby eliciting agency.

Emotions are fully acknowledged before leaping into the future, but once feelings are validated the focus is on changing what is done and said, including what people say to themselves. By reframing emotions as 'concerns about the future' we can move more quickly to what *will* be happening *when* life is more satisfactory. Questions are worded so as to be presuppositional – “ *When* things are better , what *will* you notice that *will be* different?” (rather than asking “*if* you get better....”)

Blame for the past is avoided – *responsibility* for the future is a more constructive focus. So accountable personal agency, the level of determination to work against the problem and the level of confidence about succeeding – these are scaled (usually on a scale of 1 to 10), as people are invited to work out how to start doing and saying what is good for themselves and for others.

We assume cooperation. If the work is a struggle we can ask ourselves how we can cooperate better with the service user. We consult the service users about how useful meetings are for them, and what we will be doing when meetings are more helpful. What we find helpful for others does not always work for the individuals currently being helped; we seek to build on what works for *them*.

We also seek to ‘make holes’ in people’s ‘problematic stories’, questioning them and discussing their effects. We join the person against the problem, naming it as the oppressor, for example and discussing its effects on the person, and the person’s effect on it – resisting its influence.

We watch our language carefully in the knowledge that not all talking is constructive and that problem-orientated talk can amplify problems. How we word our questions can result in a bias for change or for stuckness. Asking change-orientated questions results in change orientated talk, and people who talk of changes make more changes. ‘Pre-session change’ questions will elicit talk of changes made before the work started and this can lead to questions eliciting agency - “How did you *do* that?”. ‘Miracle’ questions help to clarify goals, and an exploration of what will be happening and who will be doing and saying what. Then we ask what parts of the goal/solution are already happening sometimes?, how does she/he do this? and who will notice when she/he does more of it?. Such constructive questioning helps service users to realise that they already have/know the seeds of solutions, if not the actual solutions, for the problems. They just don’t know that they know this until we ask them our questions.

Externalising questions such as “If the problem was an animal, what would it be?” or “What name would you like to give it?” “Do you sometimes manage to tame it?”

help in discussing the problem as outside the person and suggesting that ways of undermining it or weakening it can be found.

In discussing the future, we think of the process as watching a video, looking for location, action, dialogue, the level of determination and of confidence. Hence questions about the person's *determination* to go there, one's *confidence* that one can do it and what it will look, sound and feel like when more of it is done in the future.

These aspects are explored further by *scaled questions* which can get into the detail of the step-by-step journey towards the goal. These questions help to show that a situation is neither all bad nor all good, that the future need not be perfect and that progress is small steps up the scale. So we can ask "How will you know that you have moved up one point on the scale?" Throughout the process the worker *utilises* everything the service user brings to the conversation, as a builder would utilise the materials that are available – we have no better materials. We can amplify the persons materials by asking several times "What else ?" – searching for more exceptions, more signs of ability and progress. It is as if our questions help to cement together the service user's 'bricks', in building up the story of a better future.

When people want to understand *why* they have a problem, we ask which would they prefer – to know that or to know the solution. Doing the solution is more useful than not doing the problem; *starting* something else is more useful than *stopping* the problem. So we explore what abilities or exceptions will help to start improvement. Future-talk develops possibilities for the present. We can even start at the end, when all will be well, and work out backwards the steps to be taken.

Between-sessions tasks may we suggested at the end of meetings or in feedback notes. In general, where clear exceptions or some progress is found the task is usually to do more of what is helpful. Where there is a lack of progress, the task could be to do "something different that is good for you". Pretend tasks are often suggested if the work seems stuck – a person may be asked to pretend that life is satisfactory for a day and report back what she/he noticed that was different.

Experiencing change in the imagination can give a sense that the hoped-for change is possible, and this can lead to experimenting with doing life differently in some small ways. The very talking about this begins to construct an inner experience of a 'real' possibility of change which invites the person to opt for better ways of being.

deShazer (1985) has said that, in discussing what to do, it is useful to remember that: if it is not broken, don't fix it; if it works, do more of it; if it is not working, do something different. Be pragmatic. Rather than discussing the avoidance of 'relapse', we can talk of 'preparation for slipping back', because a slip-back is a sign that one has moved forward, not a sign of failure. So we ask how the person can *move forward again* and do something different to lessen the risk of slips.

In child protection work we scale signs of safety as well as signs of danger and focus on building up the former. While we never ignore dangers, we believe it is more constructive to look for and increase signs of safety, a task parents are more likely to work at (Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Turnell and Essex, 2006).

Lastly, ideas, decisions and plans discovered in a discussion are recorded briefly; strengths, possibilities, progress up a scale etc., are noted and a copy is given to the service user. We believe these notes reinforce the new narrative when read.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to outline a number of approaches and perspectives which have emerged over recent years which explicitly draw on and use ideas and concepts associated with postmodernism and social constructionism. In particular we have outlined an approach we call *Constructive Social Work*. In doing so, a range of creative, critical and challenging possibilities have been opened up – not only in terms of how we can understand and analyse contemporary social work but also in providing positive contributions to practice itself. In doing so, such approaches can be seen as being particularly pertinent to developing and refining the notion of reflective practice (Cooper, 2008). In a world of uncertainty and rapid change, reflective practice offers the possibility of

developing strategies for learning how to learn and how to practise in a self-conscious constructive way. The concern is less with developing our knowledge than with developing and deploying our capacities for reflexivity and creative action.

We can do this in ways that build on the major strengths of social work's early past as narrative and artistry, rather than its more recent past as a science. Good practice is like good conversation, taking turns, using simile and metaphor, recounting and exploring differences and change, imaging possibilities, co-authoring and re-authoring new stories of heroism, survival and triumph, remaining comfortable with uncertainty, questioning how to exercise choice and responsibility, **and come to experience life differently.**

Constructive Social Work is characterised by humility, openness, respect and curiosity about understandings, abilities and possibilities.

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