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1. Critical Reflection as an Educational Process: A Practice Example

Christine Morley

Christine Morley BSW (Hons) PhD is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work and the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

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Address for Correspondence

Dr Christine Morley
Email Address: CMorley@usc.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Numerous social workers discuss the importance of critical reflection and refer to its capacity as an educational tool to improve practice, yet there is relatively little evidence to support the claims made about the benefits of critical reflection by its proponents. This paper contributes to addressing this gap by reporting on the critically reflective educational process undertaken by one practitioner. The transformative learning gained by this practitioner provides a concrete example of how critical reflection improved her thinking about practice by increasing congruence between her espoused theoretical framework and her actual practice, and by creating opportunities for emancipatory practice within a context where she felt constrained to achieve critical practice aims. The paper suggests critical reflection is an important component of social work education.

INTRODUCTION

Critical reflection is accepted by many practitioners, educators and researchers around the world as an essential ingredient of critical and progressive social work (see for example, Allan, Briskman and Pease, 2009; Davies and Leonard, 2004; Fook, 2002; Morley, 2004, 2008b, 2009; Napier and Fook, 2000; Pockett and Giles, 2008; Taylor and White, 2000). Claims about the benefits of critical reflection in social work are widespread and extensive (Fook and Gardner, 2007, pp. 139-40). For example, it has been suggested that critical reflection has the capacity to enable practitioners to improve practice by building congruence between their espoused theoretical framework and their actual practice (Fook, 1996). It has also been contended that critical reflection can create opportunities for emancipatory practice within contexts where practitioners feel limited to practice in critical ways (Fook, 2004). However, little has been documented in a systematic way about what this might look like in practice. This paper specifically presents the educational experience and subsequent transformative learning that one social work practitioner engaged in by virtue of participating in a research project that used critical reflection as the methodology. The outcomes of her learning suggest that critical reflection is an important part of social work education.

DEFINING CRITICAL REFLECTION

Critical reflection can be defined in a multitude of ways. For the purposes of the research, I used Fook's (1996; 2002) model of critical reflection. This model isolates "the ways in which we might unwittingly affirm discourses that work against us, and the people we are working with" (Fook, 2000, p.133). It adapts the reflective approach first developed by Argyris and Schön (1976; see also Schön, 1983, 1987) to critical social work by incorporating critical postmodern ideas (Allan et al., 2009; Healy, 2000; Hick et al., 2005; Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Pease and Fook, 1999). Critical postmodernism, which is the underpinning theoretical framework of Fook's (2002) model of critical reflection, offers broad contextual understandings of social issues by combining structural and gendered analyses with interpretive frameworks to formulate

democratic, socially just responses and strategies for progressive social change. This enables the links between the individual and the social context to become explicit through an analysis of how language and social practices produce and construct meaning. Fook (2002, pp. 40-1) suggests:

... a postmodern and critical social work practice is primarily committed to practising in ways which further a society without domination, exploitation or oppression... [and] ... focus[es] on how structures dominate, but also on how people construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations, recognising that there may be multiple and diverse constructions of ostensibly similar situations. Such an understanding of social relations and structures can be used to disrupt dominant power relations and structures.

Adding critical postmodern theoretical dimensions to earlier understandings of the reflective approach contributes “a broader framework for understanding what critical reflection can and should help achieve” (Fook, 2004, p.20), particularly in the context of professional learning in social work.

In the example presented in this paper, critical reflection was used to help Barbara, a social work practitioner, scrutinise the implicit assumptions and values embedded in her practice in order to learn from it. As part of a larger research project, (described elsewhere (Morley, 2008a)), I asked Barbara to talk about a particular incident that occurred in the context of her practice. Critical reflection on incidents has been widely used in education (Flanagan, 1954; Killen and McKee, 1983 cited in Brookfield, 1990; Wilson- Pessano, 1988 cited in Brookfield, 1990; Benner, 1984; Fook 1996; Fook, Ryan and Hawkins, 2000). When using critical incident analysis to facilitate a critically reflective learning, “the incident and its ‘telling’ become the ‘story’ of the person which is deconstructed or reflected on” and later reconstructed (Fook, 2002, p. 99; Fook, 1999). This paper will now outline the transformative learning process undertaken by Barbara through critical reflection on her practice. Transformative learning is profound learning, where deep level assumptions are identified, confronted and changed (Mezirow, 1990; Brookfield, 1990).

Barbara's Story

Barbara is an Australian woman who had worked as an after hours counsellor/advocate at a regional Centre Against Sexual Assault in Australia for almost three years. It was in this capacity of providing an after hours crisis response to people who have recently been sexually assaulted that the incident Barbara chose to critically reflect on occurred. Barbara chose this incident because even though it had occurred more than twelve months before we met, she was still thinking about it and wondering how her practice might have been different and how she may have produced a more satisfactory outcome.

Barbara described a situation where a man with an intellectual disability was referred to the after hours service after being sexually assaulted by an older male who lived in the vicinity of the residential care institution in which he, the victim/survivor, lived. Barbara's primary concerns at the time were that the police seemed to respond with hostility towards the victim/survivor and attempted to undermine the crisis care unit process by hurrying the victim/survivor and complaining about his decision to have a forensic examination. She explained: *"The police wanted me to move things along... They even got more frustrated with the fact that he wanted to have a forensic examination."* She believed that *"because this person... had an intellectual disability: [the police insinuated] 'what's the point?'"* Barbara couldn't understand the lack of patience exhibited by the police or the level of aggression directed towards the victim/survivor by them. She indicated that she felt conflicted about managing the needs of the victim/survivor, whilst resisting the pressure of the police. As she explains: *"I felt like I wanted to spend the time with him, [the victim/survivor] but I also felt quite pressured by the police to actually move things along. Therefore I felt in conflict."*

The personal distress that this incident caused for Barbara was evident throughout her account. As she states:

It wasn't very pleasant... I just felt awkward at times. Like I got off on the back foot and that made me feel a bit flustered... Talking to the police, it just made me feel uncomfortable. I couldn't understand why they were being so

awful to him. Then I was sort of questioning myself... It just made me feel probably a bit vulnerable and a bit confused.

The failure of the police to deliver just responses to victims/survivors can be extremely distressing for the practitioners who are charged with the responsibility of supporting them (Jarvis and McIlwaine, 1997). However, perhaps more significant is the devastating impact the legal response can have on victims/survivors (see for example, Heath, 2007; Jarvis and McIlwaine, 1997; Maier, 2008). It was clear from Barbara's account that the victim/survivor did not feel validated, supported or heard by the police. As she explained:

He [the victim/survivor] actually said to me at one stage that he felt the police didn't want him to speak to them... And he said to me at the end, 'I don't think the police will want to listen to me.' I said 'How come?' And he said 'Oh, I don't think they like me.'

Despite the experiences of this victim/survivor, complainants of sexual assault have a right to expect that police responses will not do further harm to them. Barbara's role was to ensure that the rights of the victim/survivor to be heard, to be treated with respect and integrity, and to feel safe when making a complaint to police, were upheld. She expressed:

...regardless of everything else, this person has presented to us. He is in need of our service. We need to do the right thing by him: provide him with that service as equal to everybody else. No questions about it. And that's our philosophy and it should be theirs [the police] as well.

However, Barbara indicated that she felt powerless to challenge the police when she witnessed them act in hostile, invalidating and dismissive ways towards the victim/survivor. The issues embedded in the scenario she described clearly resonate with feminist analyses that highlight the often inappropriate and insensitive responses by the police (see for example, Maier, 2008; Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRFC), 2008). Also consistent with the literature, Barbara's commentary highlights the increased difficulty for victims/survivors with an intellectual disability to exercise their rights in the criminal justice system (see for example, Phillips, 1996).

This exclusive focus on structural and external factors however, arguably diverted Barbara's attention away from the internal aspects of her own practice, which should, from a critical perspective, have more effectively supported the victim/survivor in the process of him engaging with the police. Whilst Barbara's commentary indicated a keen awareness of the negative consequences that the police response was having on the victim/survivor, her original narrative expressed a firm belief that she would not have been able to challenge them about their inappropriate conduct. As she states, "*The way they [the police] interacted with him was not appropriate, but there was nothing I could do about it.*"

In addition, though Barbara's stated position was that she would routinely challenge people in authority to correct perceived injustices (in her other role as a school social worker), her practice did not match her espoused theory in this situation as she did not challenge the police about their behaviour in this instance. She stated: "*I was annoyed with myself that I didn't do that [challenge the police] because ordinarily I would have.*"

As with most of the practitioners who participated in the study, critical reflection highlighted a disparity between Barbara's espoused intentions and her actual practice; a phenomenon well documented in reflective approaches to learning (Argyris and Schön, 1976; Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987) and practice (Fook, 1996; 2002; Fook et al., 2006). Incongruity between theory and practice in this sense was probably first identified by educationalists Argyris and Schön (1976) and later developed further by Schön (1983; 1987) who proposed a reflective process for uncovering implicit assumptions, particularly in relation to professional learning. Some authors also credit the earlier work of Dewey (1916; 1933) as being formative in the development of our current understanding of uses of reflective practice (Mezirow and Associates, 1990, 2000; Redmond, 2004; Fook, White and Gardner, 2006).

In acknowledging the gap between Barbara's espoused intention to support and advocate for her service user, and her practice which acquiesced to preserve dominant power relations with the police,

Barbara cited a number of reasons that prevented her from challenging the police at the time. She explains:

So I suppose not feeling like I could challenge them was a combination of their manner and how we started things off [regarding a mix-up about the initial meeting place with the police]. Then as things went on, I just didn't feel confident enough. Plus the confusion about [my role]... We've never really discussed challenging the police and all of that in our meetings or training. I just know that [the co-ordinator] advocates for us if we have issues, but we've never really discussed what we can actually do in the situation... And that left me, in an unknown area... You know, and I suppose I was worried about... that the negatives of it would be fragmenting that relationship that we have with the police... I suppose I was worried about the consequences. I thought, oh, I don't want to be seen as the sort of person that causes a bit of an issue... What happens afterwards? What are the repercussions for me?... I just thought, oh, there could be some repercussions of that for me personally, but also for the [sexual assault service].”

In addition, Barbara indicated that she believed that advocating for the victim/survivor with the police might hold negative consequences for him. As she comments: *“I think, I wouldn't want to put that [conflict with the police] on him [the victim/survivor], and distress him even more; he's got enough on his plate, if that makes sense.”*

Therefore, in summary Barbara's explanations for not being able to advocate effectively with the police for the victim/survivor at the time included:

- A mix-up about the meeting place that occurred at the beginning of the crisis care unit, which Barbara felt responsible for, therefore inhibiting her willingness to challenge the police;
- A lack of confidence to challenge the police, and feeling confused or uncertain about doing this, given that it had not previously been discussed at staff meetings and training;
- A belief that it was not necessary to challenge the police during the

crisis care unit because the after hours co-ordinator formally raises issues after an incident;

- A sense that there would be both personal consequences for herself and the service user, and a detrimental impact for the service if she challenged the police;
- A lack of sufficient knowledge of police processes and philosophies, and a lack of opportunity to learn about these; and
- A fear of the 'unknown' consequences of challenging the police

Theorising Barbara's Practice Response

From a positivist or realist perspective, Barbara's initial account carries the authority of 'the truth' which is assumed to be singular, fixed and unquestionable. This end result is that the final (dominant) story is understood as a situation of hopelessness and lack of agency for Barbara, and powerlessness and injustice for the service user.

However, critical reflection reveals how various layers of assumptions were operating in tandem to support a dominant narrative that rendered Barbara's capacity to exercise power and agency invisible. (The details of the critical reflection process will be discussed next in the following section). From a critical postmodern perspective, Barbara's initial narrative is not the only or final account, but the beginning of a process where meaning is constructed, renegotiated and changed along potentially more emancipatory lines. In this way, Barbara's initial story is positioned as one construction among a multitude of possible interpretations. This enables the possibility of other constructions that are more empowering and enabling for practitioners and service users to surface and contribute to renewed understandings (Fook, 2002). For Barbara, the aim of the critical reflection process was to uncover narratives of agency and resistance that would enable her to challenge the police, and more effectively support the victim/survivor.

CRITICAL REFLECTION AS AN EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Fook (2002, p.91) contends that critical reflection involves deconstruction, resistance, challenge and change/reconstruction. Following initial description of the incident, those participating in critical reflection can begin to deconstruct their accounts of their practice. This involves reflective questioning to identify and challenge dominant discourses, uncover how different discourses are implicated in supporting the dominant interests, and develop alternative perspectives (Fook, 2004; Rossiter, 2005). Critical reflection questions aim to elucidate dominant discourses that promote the interests of the most powerful groups in society, often to the detriment of our service users and our emancipatory aims as critical practitioners. They expose the ways these discourses often infiltrate our thinking as practitioners, manifesting as common sense, or taken-for-granted beliefs (Fook, 2002). Exposing the roles and implications of these 'unquestionable' beliefs, assumptions and values, destabilises and resists the restrictive or unhelpful elements of our thinking that limit our practice options (Ellermann, 1998; Fook, 2002; Taylor and White, 2000). Used in this way, critical reflection questions created a dialogue between myself and Barbara in which I aimed to assist her to uncover unarticulated assumptions she was holding about power, identity, binary oppositional constructions universal narratives, and so on. While the questions I used were tailored to Barbara's individual story, they were largely based on Fook's (2002, pp. 92-3) model of critical reflection. I included questions such as: what are your assumptions about power? Who has it? How do you know? What are the implications for your practice of you constructing yourself in powerless terms in relation to the police? These deconstruction questions sought to expose Barbara's participation in discourses that acted contrary to her espoused theory and to the detriment of the victim/survivor.

Following deconstruction, the next stage of the critically reflective educational process focuses on reconstructing participants' critical incident analyses in ways that open up different possibilities for practice. Reconstruction is "the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent

understanding, appreciation and action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). Some of the questions I used to assist Barbara to reconstruct her experience, which were also largely based on Fook’s (2002, p.101) questions included: How do your actions compare with how you assumed you were acting? Now that you understand power can be exercised as well as structurally defined, how does that free you to think differently about how you may have responded to the police? What needs to change for you to bring your practice more in line with your espoused intentions?

These processes of deconstruction and reconstruction facilitated significant changes in Barbara’s thinking, enabling her to improve her thinking about practice by building congruence between her espoused theoretical framework and her actual practice, and, to create opportunities for emancipatory practice by supporting and advocating for the victim/survivor despite the intimidating behaviour of the police. Whilst there are no set rules about how deconstruction and reconstruction should happen, in working with Barbara, we met on two separate occasions: the first meeting was to hear the telling of her narrative and begin deconstruction; the second meeting was to revisit learning gained from the first interview and focus on reconstructing her narrative to develop alternative understandings and opportunities for practice. Some of the outcomes of the educational processes that Barbara engaged in as part of the deconstruction and reconstruction of her critical incident analysis are presented next.

CRITICAL REFLECTION ON BARBARA’S ACCOUNT

In the deconstruction of Barbara’s story, she began to realise that her initial account of the situation was not an independent, factual representation, but a series of socially constructed interpretations that had been influenced by her own social biography and positioning (Fook, 1999). For example, I asked how her sense of feeling *‘flustered’* or *‘confused’* may have influenced her initial construction of the situation. She recognised that her emotional response had led her to privilege the uncertainty she felt about challenging the police. As she stated: *“I suppose because I did see myself on the back foot. . .I’ve emphasised the confusion that*

I felt about raising the issues with them. I think I've emphasised that because that's how I felt then from the start."

Barbara also recognised that she has foregrounded a particular version of the story that marginalised other possible interpretations. As she acknowledged:

I suppose what we have talked about is actually my interpretation of the situation more so than actually what was happening. You know, how initially I probably interpreted the situation led to my demise I suppose, or just sort of set me into a bit of spin, or on a particular path... So maybe if I had of interpreted things differently, internally, it probably would have made me react differently.

Similarly, using critical reflection, Barbara began to understand the impact of (her) self on the construction of her initial incident which enabled her to unravel the ways that her interpretations had distorted aspects of her recollection. For example, given that Barbara's initial account conveyed a sense that she was responsible for off-siding the police because they were waiting in a different area of the hospital with the victim/survivor, her espoused theory was one of self blame: *"I even instantly felt like: are they just going to think I'm an absolute idiot? I felt a bit disorganised and I just felt that maybe they were thinking that too."* This cycle of thinking was consistent with her actions that then took steps to locate the police and move to where they were waiting in order to rectify the problem.

However, deconstructing these 'facts', which were recognised as socially constructed pieces of history, Barbara began to acknowledge that her actions had complied with an interpretation of the situation which benefited the police. When she recognised this, she stated: *"That's interesting. I'm trying to make everything better [laughter]. That's right. I'm actually trying to fix things up and I've taken responsibility and assumed that it was all my fault because I was downstairs... I automatically started to go into justification mode, even though they [the police] were equally responsible for the mix-up."*

Barbara's initial belief that the 'mix-up' was her responsibility was significant because it was formative in undermining her sense of confidence and agency. This contributed to her ultimate decision not to challenge the police about their inappropriate conduct, resulting in the initial gap between her espoused theory and actual practice.

In exploring other interpretations, Barbara began to reject the terms of reference created by the police to develop a more enabling interpretation which valued her role in the situation. As she states, *"Actually, I was on time, and I was meeting the criteria that we're supposed to meet basically. I don't actually need to own as much as what I did in relation to them."*

In expanding her rejection of the dominant discourses that were unhelpful for her practice, critical reflection highlighted the ways Barbara had unconsciously taken on and reproduced the language embedded in the discourses propagated by the police. For example, in assisting Barbara to deconstruct her use of language, I asked Barbara whether she realised that she had referred to forensic examination as "all that rigmarole that adds another hour onto the whole thing". This dominant discourse is often perpetuated by the police, but not by counsellor/advocates. Barbara's recognition that she had been complicit in embracing police discourses shocked her: "Far out! I'm sounding like them. I may as well go and get my uniform now, and put my badge on. I don't need to go through the exams. I am them!"

Barbara also interrogated the implications of her choice of words when she discussed about being "allowed" to speak with the victim/survivor. As she acknowledged: "It's almost like I felt that I needed permission from the police to speak to him."

In reconstructing options to resist her internalisation of dominant discourses, Barbara indicated she found it useful to draw on practice experiences where she had managed to resist some undermining comments by the police. She also talked about overtly naming problematic behaviours in more actively taking control of the discourse. As she explained, *"... if it [the poor conduct of the police] becomes really obvious, then in future I wouldn't have an issue to say, 'I don't think that's appropriate' or whatever."*

Reclaiming control over the discourse and reconstructing possibilities for critical practice in this way assisted Barbara to reject the self blame that was initially limiting her practice. It de-centred her emphasis on appeasing the police, appropriately repositioning the victim/survivor to a more dominant/ central position within the situation. Therefore, critical reflection created the opportunity for Barbara to close the gap between her espoused theory and practice, ultimately improving her practice response. As she stated:

That for me, just reframing those things, would have been very powerful... I would have just focused on the victim/survivor, and what I was really there to do, which was to find out his story, and to support him, and to advocate on his behalf, really. And I probably wouldn't have even engaged in much conversation with the police beforehand. I probably would have just introduced myself and concentrated my energies on supporting the victim/survivor.

Taking control of the discourse was also an important factor in challenging Barbara's perceived lack of agency and confidence. For example, an assumption that seemed to compound Barbara's sense of intimidation and perpetuate the notion that the police were in control was the number of police present at the crisis care unit. Given that there is always more than one police member who attends a crisis care unit, yet only ever one counsellor/advocate, Barbara stated: *"For me, there's another issue too; you know, like it's a numbers thing. Here's little old me, and my head and my brain, and there's those two."*

In acknowledging that the police often do out-number counsellor/ advocates, Barbara began to question the usefulness of a construction that greater police representation equates with the disempowerment of counsellor/ advocates. Barbara appeared to recognise that this had been another implicit assumption that was operating to benefit the police, and to her detriment: *"That's not helpful. That leads us to feel powerless."* She also moved to reconstruct this assumption: *"Regardless of the numbers, I can still use humour to deflect and some other things that might balance out the power... Regardless of how many of them there are."*

Creating permission to challenge the police

Barbara also revisited her initial assumption about challenging the police being fraught with consequences: either for herself; the victim/survivor; or for the relationship between the agency and the police. At the time, her practice response was to remain silently disappointed, maintaining the status quo. Deconstruction of her practice highlighted that her response emerged from an implicit binary oppositional construction (Fook, 2002) that presented her options in dichotomous terms: either challenge the police with “*all guns blazing*” in a way that would inevitably involve conflict and confrontation, or, not challenge the police at all. Reconstructing her thinking about power and her positioning in relation to the police, Barbara gave herself permission to challenge them by exploring alternative interpretations which transcended this dichotomy. Reminding the police about appropriate conduct was reinterpreted as sharing her knowledge and expectations, thus creating a learning opportunity for the police. As she explains:

So I've thought about that and perhaps it's not fair to them to not give them [the police] the opportunity to actually have that information... If I turn my thoughts over to that sort of thinking, I could actually be assisting them, and then ultimately it impacts on all the victims/survivors we have in the unit, and all the other workers. So why wouldn't that be a good thing to do?

This enabled Barbara to conceptualise the possibility of challenging inappropriate conduct by the police and so more effectively support and advocate for the service user, rather than blaming the police for her sense of disempowerment.

Reconstructing this interpretation appeared to free Barbara considerably to feel like she could engage in a dialogue with the police, and challenge them about their response to the victim/survivor, without this being fraught with the negative consequences she had originally assumed.

As she states, in liberating herself from her own self regulatory thinking: “*I can see it totally clearly, and how much all of that was in my head, you know, and how I was constructing that for myself, without them doing that for me. Do you know what I mean? It was all me I suppose.*”

Such learning created several other practice possibilities for Barbara. For example, she revisited the assumption that advocating with the police on behalf of the victim/survivor in front of him may be harmful. In recognising that this assumption might have limited her opportunities to effectively support the victim/survivor she developed an alternative discourse. As she states,

It might have been powerful for him [the victim/survivor] to see that [her advocacy with the police] and show him how supportive I was of him... it would have also given him some information about his rights.... In a way, it could be seen as educating the client at the same time.

Liberating Barbara to privilege an account that highlights the potential benefits of the victim/survivor witnessing her advocacy with the police, rather than the potential problems, further operates to dismantle the barriers that Barbara had previously constructed about challenging the police. Therefore, this created additional opportunities for more emancipatory practice that is consistent with her espoused intention.

Paralleling this, Barbara deconstructed a number of, what Fook (2002) describes as artificially constructed dichotomies, which were embedded within her original account and appeared to limit her thinking and practice options. For example, she reviewed her assumption that formal processes aimed at addressing breaches of the police code of practice happen at the expense of informal interactions. This assumption was expressed in Barbara's narrative when she contended that there was no need to challenge the police during a crisis care unit, because the after hours co-ordinator would action a complaint to the police hierarchy through formal processes after an incident. This understanding embodies the dichotomous assumption that one course of action precludes others. As she initially commented:

I'm a bit of a person about process, so if I wanted to make an issue about it: well, I would report it to my team leader and ...follow the process from there, rather than taking it into your own hands.

In questioning the usefulness of this construction which restricts Barbara's options for action, she commented:

Yes, and that's the thing I've reflected on too. Regardless of whether I did challenge them [the police] or not at the time, if I did, I could still follow it up at the other end [through formal processes] too. It still needs to be followed up on that [management] level as well as, in addition to me challenging them [the police] at the time. Just shows you sort of mean business too.

Another dichotomous construction that Barbara deconstructed concerned the relationship between herself and the police. Barbara consistently described herself in mutually exclusive terms from the police throughout her commentary. For example she initially stated:

Our philosophies of how we treat and work with victims/survivors I think at times are totally opposite to theirs really. Like I said earlier: my empowerment versus their control of the situation at all times... So they're totally at different ends of the spectrum to us. I see [the differences in] real black and white [terms], and yet we're trying to work together.

Deconstruction enabled Barbara to recognise that her participation in these dichotomous power relations could operate to reinforce her sense of powerlessness. When I asked Barbara what the implications may be for her of participating in this binary oppositional relationship, and where this left her, she stated: *"Nowhere. Powerless"*.

In exploring other constructions, Barbara posited another discourse that reconstructed the dichotomy that had been created between the agency and the police. She suggested that *"seeing ourselves as multi-disciplinary team members"* might be one alternative. The notion of valuing, rather than polarising, difference, enabled Barbara to locate her relationships with the police in a discourse about teamwork and commonality (Morley, 2005). Her reconstruction involved a notion of working together, in that even though she was offering different things to the police, they were all potentially working towards similar goals, albeit coming at it from different perspectives. She further explains: *"In a sense we offer different*

things, but none is actually more or less important than the other; they are just different.”

Significantly, this construction allows differences between the police and counsellor/advocates to be acknowledged without being constructed as what Fook (2002, pp.82-5) refers to as a threat to equity. The assumption that the police would need to have the same philosophy as counsellor/advocates in order to work together was also rejected as Barbara was able to emphasise points of commonality between the police and the role of a practitioner: “... *even just the basic: that we’re there for the victim/survivor.*”

An additional factor which prevented Barbara from enacting her espoused commitment to challenging the police and advocating for the victim/survivor was her construction of the after hours crisis role in terms of the ‘unknown’. As she states, “*You don’t know what client you’re going to get. You don’t know the circumstances really about what’s happened. It’s all unknown really.*”

By way of contrast, Barbara initially constructed her other social work role at a school in familiar terms. However, deconstructing this assumption allowed her to develop a more holistic account: “*I am in here [at the school] some days, and you just never know what’s going to happen... Even though I do know kids and parents and stuff, I don’t know what’s going to walk through that door*”. Recognising the uncertainty that exists in both roles and acknowledging that Barbara is quite adept at responding to new or unpredictable situations at the school role, enabled her to question her previous notion of the ‘unknown’ in her sexual assault counsellor/advocate role as problematic. Barbara formed a new understanding which enabled her to let go of the expectation that she needs to know every detail about everything, or to have to absolute control, in order to be an effective practitioner.

Another reason that Barbara provided for not practicing in a manner consistent with her espoused approach was her sense that she did not have sufficient knowledge about police processes and philosophies, and that there was a lack of opportunity to learn more about these. As she initially stated: “*If I had more knowledge about what their role was, I could*

challenge them a lot more about that, and be more aware about what they're up to, and what they're supposed to be doing."

Highlighting this narrative hid the related assumption about needing more knowledge of the unknown. Barbara was therefore able to reconstruct her perception to create a more helpful discourse. As she stated, "Afterwards, I didn't feel like I needed to know the ins and outs of their role anymore. I realise I don't need necessarily all that knowledge to challenge the police and I'll handle that because I can."

In addition, Barbara revisited the assumption that once you've lost control, it can never be regained. During the first interview Barbara deconstructed her interpretations about being "on the back foot." Examining the usefulness of this assumption for her practice, she rejected it and posited an alternative discourse that highlighted where she was able to resist the police and therefore regain control. As she explains in reconstructing her account *"I suppose just having a different assumption about that [her construction of being on the 'back foot'] would be useful: if something happens, you don't have to think, oh that's it; that you can't ever not make it different."*

Barbara also discussed her capacity to recreate meaning in relation to identity. Understanding identity as multiple, fluid and changing (Sands, 1996), she recognised that just because she had felt *'flustered'*, *'vulnerable'* and so on, at one point in time, that this does not have to constitute a permanent state. She reconstructed that at another point in time she might have been able to subjectively relocate herself in the discourse as someone who is empowered and articulate. As she explains: *"you're not static, so you can just change that. It doesn't have to be that way at all."*

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper has offered some practice evidence to support the claims made about the benefits of critical reflection. In order to demonstrate this, the paper has presented the experience and subsequent transformative learning processes of Barbara, a social work practitioner, who participated in a research project that used critical reflection as the methodology.

The educational process that Barbara engaged in suggests that critical reflection is an important component of social work education because it highlights gaps between practitioner's espoused theoretical position and their actual practice, thereby enabling them to devise strategies to improve their practice by promoting consistency between the two. Critical reflection on Barbara's practice also suggests that it can be used to create opportunities for practitioners to envision critical practice options within scenarios where they feel constrained to facilitate emancipatory outcomes.

In summarising the major changes in Barbara's thinking, critical reflection enabled her to firstly resist the discourses of self blame that she had internalised, based on how she interpreted the police response towards her. Deconstruction created opportunities for Barbara to rethink her original construction of her critical incident and reject dominant discourses which were limiting for her practice. Deconstructing Barbara's account revealed a number of implicit assumptions that were operating contrary to her espoused use of theory, her practice, and the interests of the service user. Identifying these assumptions and recognising the detrimental implications of them for her practice, enabled Barbara to change them, and ultimately reconstruct her practice in a way that gave her permission to challenge the police, thereby bringing her actual practice in line with her espoused theoretical intentions.

Reconstruction facilitated Barbara's capacity to exercise power through taking control of the discourse, particularly by creating opportunities to more effectively support the victim/survivor. In addition, Barbara reconstructed a number of dichotomies in her thinking to create more complex and holistic understandings of for example, formal processes versus informal processes, Barbara versus the police, and her school social work role versus her after hours sexual assault role. Additional assumptions that Barbara reconstructed to connect with her sense of agency included: that the 'unknown,' is necessarily dangerous; that knowledge equates with power; and, the assumption that once control is lost, it cannot be regained. Ultimately, developing correspondence between Barbara's espoused feminist framework and her actual practice,

created change possibilities in the form of challenging the police, which had previously seemed inconceivable because of the way she had initially constructed the situation. This holds important implications for social work education, particularly critical social work education, which is committed to finding ways to support practitioners to challenge and change dominant power relations and structures that produce social injustices and inequities. Finally, Barbara's experience of critical reflection as an educational process suggests that it can be empowering and liberating for practitioners' sense of professional development and learning, even whilst subjecting their practice to scrutiny and interrogation. As Barbara stated:

This process has been good. I've loved it... It's been great because it's prompted some things in my mind about why I might have done things in a particular way and how things could be done differently to improve.

AUTHOR NOTES:

Barbara is a pseudonym chosen by the practitioner to protect her anonymity.

Crisis care unit is the terminology used to refer to the process that occurs when counsellor/advocates meet with the victim/survivor to discuss and co-ordinate medical and legal options following a sexual assault

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