

Knowing Nothing: Understanding New Critical Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Individuals embarking on their journey to become professional social workers often state they feel as if they know nothing upon entering their practice. Regardless of the number of years critical social workers have practiced, they are also thought to know “nothing.” By utilizing a philosophical hermeneutic approach I chose to recognize that new critical social work ideas, theories and practices come from something and somewhere (Moules, 2002). This hermeneutic study involved interviewing six newly graduated social workers with a declared critical orientation. I asked these budding new professionals to describe what happens when they begin working in organizations that may or may not support a critical ideology and how this influences their practice. Hermeneutic interpretations of the participant experiences suggest that this nothing is not devoid of meaning or method, but instead involves insinuating themselves and their ideas into their agencies in a delicate curvilinear manner.

Keywords

critical social work practice, hermeneutics, research, social work practice

Exploring Nothing

One day while discussing my proposed doctoral project with a university instructor and colleague, she asked me why I would want to study the experiences of students or new graduates; “they know *nothing*,” she said. This word stayed with me for several weeks. It buried itself under my skin and wriggled about my consciousness. Over and over, I asked myself how someone who works in an

educational institution could say this about the individuals she sends out the door. Why did we have these institutions if not to teach these new recruits *something*? Yet, I recognized a truth to which she spoke.

Individuals embarking on their journeys to become professional social workers often

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state they feel as if they know nothing upon entering their practicums, and later their practice. I have also heard this said about critical social workers because the theories are thought to be difficult to operationalize. Critical social work practice involves adopting a political perspective and lies in the work of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School theorists, feminist theorists, and critical pedagogy theorist Paulo Freire. Over the years, the term *critical* has come to define a number of distinct approaches, such as radical, structural, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive social work practice. As Fook noted "...critical social work, as a coherent term, has only been used more explicitly in the last few years, mostly in literature from Canada (e.g. Rossiter, 1996) and Australia (e.g. Ife, 1997)" (2002, p. 124). In Canada, critical social work theory and practice is closely identified with structural approaches developed by Carniol (1979, 2005), Moreau (1979), Moreau and Leonard (1989), Mullaly (1993), and Rossiter (1996). Critical approaches to social work practice attempt to integrate professional social work values within personal, social, and political contexts (Haynes, 1999). This approach to social work practice questions the validity of pathology-based social work perspectives and theories, and focuses on the oppressions that cause the private troubles or pathologies (Rossiter, 1996). Because of their suspicion and limited use of therapeutic models, graduates of critical schools are sometimes believed to be poorly prepared to directly improve their clients' situation, compared to their clinical or generalist social work colleagues (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

Regardless of what individuals call themselves upon graduation - critical, generalist, or clinical - they are all definitely seeking "something." The word *nothing* originates from the Old English word *naping*, which means "not one thing" ("Nothing," 2001).

What became very clear to me after embarking on this research journey is that reality is not constructed *ex nihilo* but rather constructed from something. The form, organization, and something became my concern (Pozzuto, Dezendorf, & Arnd-Caddigan, 2006) for my doctoral research. Still, I recognize that there is a substance to "nothing" that makes it difficult to articulate. I wanted to better understand why some forms of knowledge and practice are seen as something, and yet for some, critical practice might be seen as offering newly graduated social workers "nothing." This paper is taken from one chapter of a doctoral work that attempted to understand both the nothing and the something of non-mainstream approaches to social work practice. In it, I found myself asking these questions: How might we understand how newly graduated social workers educated in a critical tradition experience their practice? What happens to these budding professionals when they begin working in organizations that may or may not support a critical ideology? Do they end up pulling back into reserve and silence? Do they acquiesce and become like-minded, or do they find new ways to practice that simply have not been captured by the research literature?

Given that mainstream social work and critical social work are informed by profoundly different ontological, epistemological, and political assumptions (Campbell & Baikie, 2012), the tension between these divergent understandings has also shaped the practice of social work. However, the growing neoliberal momentum toward theories and practices that bring order, predictability, and cohesion to our profession has begun to tip the balance in the social work profession in a manner that has had many in the field questioning who we are, and what we actually do.

Neoliberalism, which first began as a political economic practice, proposes that

human well being is best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills (Harvey, 2005). In post-secondary institutions, neoliberal practices include a curriculum focused on competency based practice approaches over theoretical practice, the marginalization of practicum or field education programs, and an increasing division between academia and the field (Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Direct social work practice in a neoliberal context includes an overall devaluing of social work knowledge and skills, and a preference for hierarchical relationships between service users and workers over collaborative relationships. It includes privileging technical skills over structural analytic frameworks (Dominelli, 1996; Healy & Meagher, 2004; Singh & Cowden, 2009). This neoliberal environment also influences organizational practices by insisting on open competition in the allocation of funding to services in order to encourage leaner and more effective programs (Healy & Meagher, 2004). Most importantly, adopting a neoliberal ideology and framework has meant the field's move away from emancipatory change toward an increase in governmentality and economics (Healy, 2009; Jones, 2005; Madhu, 2011).

The theories that have become dominant in social work lend themselves to a neoliberal understanding of social work practice by legitimizing this practice. Theories such as cognitive and behavioral, social learning, and attachment theories are all derived from empirical research (Olsen, 2007) and, as such, appear to be predictable and reliable. They are believed to help social workers really "know" the problem they are addressing, as well as the solution. As such, they are becoming embodied in our professional psyche as "common sense." Currently, this approach to practice appears to be the only thing that counts as something.

For any way of thought to become dominant, and believed to be the only viable course of action, it must appeal to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit (Harvey, 2005). It then becomes so embedded in common sense, it is taken for granted and not open to question (Harvey, 2005). Any thoughts or actions that fall outside this dominant belief will eventually fade away to nothing. Although our overall profession claims social justice and human rights are the ideological underpinnings of good social work practice, too many social service organizations have become so far removed from the ethics of social work practice that they are unable to adequately support the staff, management, and students who desperately yearn to make changes. While institutions themselves are not practices, they embody them, nurture them, and sustain them (Chan, Chi, Ching, & Lam, 2010).

Much of our meaning making in the Western world involves characterizing things as much by what is lacking or absent as by what is present ("Nothing," 2008). Nothing can also serve as a marker for the absence of something. Some might say newly graduated students lack knowledge, or they lack a certain amount of skepticism. They have not been hardened off to the realities of real social work. Some pundits argue critical social work does not seem to relate to those things that are valued as real. I began to wonder if what is missing is the lack of Freire's concept of hope. These students may lack the pessimism, and the deterministic attitude that things can never improve. Perhaps what is not there in these new professionals is the despair that we re-label burnout.

Re-Discovering Nothing

Similarly to critical social work, philosophical hermeneutics can be a difficult and unwilling concept to define. However, Moran (2000) described it, and Gadamer's (1900-2002) contribution, fairly succinctly by stating "hermeneutics is the art of interpretation or understanding, and, for Gadamer, always signifies an ongoing, never completable process of understanding, rooted in human finitude and human linguisticity" (p. 248). I specifically chose to use a hermeneutic research method because it aspires to understand the everyday meaning of lived experiences (Bosma, 2011). It is a research practice that attempts to uncover both the differences and commonalities of lived experiences (Benner, 1994), and helps us discover all aspects of what those experiences are like (van Manen, 1997). Even though it is often assumed to be part of the technical-rational approach, practical knowledge is based on practice experience, which is co-created (Pozzuto et al, 2006). As such, practice theories may also be viewed as stories of cultural interpretation (Rossiter, 2005). We interpret our lifeworld within the boundaries of what we know and what we believe can be done. This criticality encourages us to look beyond what we believe we already know, and what we believe to be true. Philosophical hermeneutics is a form of research practice that attempts to reclaim and retrieve the humanist approach to understanding, which includes an emphasis on rhetoric, judgement, and common sense. "...This kind of understanding comes not in the form of scientific explanation (*Erklärung*) but as cultural understanding (*Verstehen*)" (Moran, 2000, p. 280).

New graduates are different from social workers who have been in the field for a number of years. New graduates are also different from students. Philosophical herme-

neutics is a form of inquiry that embraces tension, because it recognizes anxiety, stress, and strain as parts of a potentially transformative process. Using a philosophical hermeneutic approach to research helped me explore the gaps that exist in our critical education and practice; the gaps between what newly graduated critical social workers know and what they can accomplish. Becoming and being are never ending journeys in hermeneutics. It is always double-pointed, to what was and what will be, and encourages us to look beyond ourselves (Davey, 2006).

For this study, I chose to target new graduates from schools who have a mission and mandate that incorporates a critical social work framework. Although there are a number of social work schools in Canada that offer varying types of critical social work programs, I chose to narrow my focus to two schools: Carleton University and the University of Victoria. In addition to having mission statements and mandates that encompass a critical framework, Bob Mullaly (2007), a well-known Canadian critical social work theorist, identified these schools as being critical and/or structural in their curriculum content and focus.

Individuals who graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree within the last three years, who self-identified as critical and were practicing from a structural and/or anti-oppressive perspective were invited to speak to me about their experiences in the field. I contacted individuals at both institutions in charge of the alumni and student communication list, and asked them to forward my recruitment poster through their email listserve. I received two participants using this technique from the University of Victoria. Unfortunately, this strategy was not successful at Carleton University. I acquired the remainder of my participants by contacting colleagues working in either a university

or human service setting and through referrals from my current participants. I received two participants through referrals from social work colleagues, and I received two other participants through referrals from current participants.

As a critical social worker, professor, and researcher, I entered this study as an active knower within the critical social work field. I am also female, educated, middle-income, a mother, and also formerly a child who, similarly to some of my study participants, knew what it was like to grow up in poverty and want more from the world. Since it was not possible for me to ignore my past experience and understandings or pretend they did not exist, I needed to keep them at the forefront of my awareness. As such, it was important to ensure I used a process that involved writing my thoughts, feelings, and apprehensions in a journal as they arose. Immediately after every interview, I wrote memos on how I felt the interview went. In these memos, I wrote my reactions to our conversation and whether I was surprised, unsettled, or delighted by something the participant had said.

The use of reflexivity also involves acknowledging the researcher's voice, but not putting it before the participants (Leitz, Langur, & Furman, 2006). My professional position as an experienced social worker and professor meant that my vantage point of this topic could be quite different from that of the participants. I was aware that this position could be a hindrance, since my participants could see my knowledge and experience as having priority over their experiences and understandings. I knew I needed to create an environment where the interview experience allowed my participants to really say something to me. I did not want to overlook their claims, or attempt to assimilate them into mine (Schwandt, 1999) and I recognized that

if I became too dogmatic in my beliefs I would not be open to new understandings (Lawn, 2006). I made a point of letting each participant know during the interview that, although I consider myself a critical social worker, it has been a long time since I have been a newly graduated one. I also let them know that this project was not meant to determine whether critical social work works, or does not work. Instead, I explained as openly and honestly as I could that I wanted to hear what they had to say about this topic, even if they might say something which with I did not expect or agree. Being reflexive allows us to be open to dialogue at times when there may not have been an opportunity before (Ringel, 2003).

I was very fortunate in finding three male and three female social work graduates who had been educated in a critical tradition eager to share their thoughts and experiences with me. With the exception of one participant who was in his mid thirties at the time of our interview, all of the new graduates who volunteered for this research project were in their early to late twenties. Three participants, two male and one female, were graduates from the University of Victoria, and three participants, two female and one male, were graduates from Carleton University. Two of the six participants from Carleton had recently completed their Master's of Social Work from a noncritical university in Ontario. One graduate from the University of Victoria went back to complete her master's thesis at the University of Victoria during this study. Although they all described different reasons for choosing a critical social work program, every participant stated they practiced from a critical theoretical perspective, and to varying degrees believed in the approach. All six participants were working either part-time or full-time in the field at the time of the interviews. The breadth of practice experiences was quite diverse given the small number of

participants. The new graduates worked in government and non-governmental organizations, small grassroots agencies and large bureaucracies. The participants occupied frontline, community-based, policy, and international positions. They also worked in children's services, mental health, and the disability fields.

Data Gathering

The data gathered for this research included eight audiotaped interviews and eight participant emails. Six of the emails were received from each of the six participants prior to each interview. Each note sent by a participant contained an acknowledgement of interest in the project, as well as a brief reflective statement as to why he or she had something to contribute to this topic. Two pieces of data were follow-up emails sent by participants who, upon further reflection after our interviews, wanted to share some of their thoughts or insights. Although a majority of my participants did not live in Calgary, I was fortunate enough to be able to personally sit with each of them for at least one interview.

I approached my interviews according to the word's original etymology, as someone entering new territory ("Interview," 2001). Dialogue is not predictable (Lawn, 2006). Because it is unrehearsed, I had no way to decide in advance which effort would keep me from going in a direction that may not serve the topic the best (Schwandt, 1999). Although I originally developed eight questions that focused on the original intent of this inquiry, I remained mindful that much of the success of this study rode on my skill as an interviewer. The majority of the probes I employed could not be determined in advance, and were instead developed over the course of the conversation (Koch, 1996). I also could not predict, in a semi-structured interview, where each participant might take the topic.

In response to each social worker I interviewed, and the subsequent unfolding of the inquiry, I managed to slightly alter my question sequence, and introduce two additional questions. By the time I interviewed my last participant, I had changed the sequence of two of my questions, and included two additional questions around the participants' own personal stories and reasons for choosing a critical school. I made these changes deliberately, and with great care. I was acutely aware that good interviewing in a hermeneutic study involves a careful balance between staying focused on the original intent of the inquiry, but not so focused that the practice becomes a routinized method, rather than a practice of understanding (Binding & Tapp, 2008).

Data Analysis

Hermeneutic analysis is in itself an encounter. Although the actual practice is difficult to communicate (Addison, 1999), getting into the hermeneutic circle has been aptly described as an organic and iterative process (Bosma, 2011) of focusing on the whole and the part.

Being in the circle is disciplined yet creative, rigorous yet expansive....In this process there is a focus on recognizing the particular, isolating understandings, dialoguing with others about interpretations, making explicit the implicit, and, eventually finding language to describe language. (Moules, 2000, p. 47)

My analysis began with listening to each interview and making notes. I then listened to the tapes again once I had the transcriptions. I reflected on the spoken words, the subtle pauses and lengthy silences. I also focused on the laughter. I wrote my thoughts and my impressions. Once an idea or speculation surfaced, I would begin to journal my newly

forming thoughts. As an idea or word emerged that made me take note, I would also discuss it with colleagues and sometimes turn to the literature to explore it further. I read and listened to each transcript in isolation. I also read them in relation to other transcripts. To be clear, this back and forth between different tapes and transcripts was not meant to find themes. Instead, it was my attempt to "...bring forth general impressions, specific and recurring ideas, and perturbing and distinctive resonances, familiarities and echoes" (Moules, 2000, p. 46). I was looking for a revelation, a striking disclosure that surprised and unsettled me ("Revelation," 2001). I was seeking an experience that drew my attention to the unique (Lawn, 2006).

Interpretive Writing

The process of making something foreign or forgotten understandable is achieved through the interpretive writing process. Interpretive writing has been described as an exaggeration of what it wants to be heard (Moules, 2000; D.G. Smith, 1991). To exaggerate is to "heap, pile, load, fill," to bring together, and carry toward ("Exaggerate," 2001). It is the process of making our words weightier and stronger so that we may more readily pay attention to them. It is a practice that involves creating meaning, rather than reporting meaning.

Similar to the analysis process of reading and listening, interpretive writing involves a circular movement where one action begins to uncover then build upon another. After listening to audio-tapes, reading text, and consulting peers and mentors, I began to take my memos and my notes and turn them into interpretive text. I found particular addresses in the transcripts and then explored them further, in classical literature, and research literature. I took these words and began to tie them together by moving back and forth between my participant's understanding, my

understanding, and the literature's understanding. I used mythology and etymology to help me turn these words into richer meanings.

Establishing Authority, Trust, and Credibility

Authority does not come from our position; it comes from what we bring to the relationship (Gadamer, 1975/1989). It is the questions we bring and the things we open up that give us authority (Lawn, 2006). Ultimately, I can only ensure the authority and trust of my readers if I am able to achieve a plausible interpretation, namely, providing enough contextual information in my writings that others are able to make similar readings (Koch, 1996). The findings of this project should speak to people, and make them consider things in a new way that they previously understood differently. To achieve this goal, I followed a process that included keeping a reflexive journal (Koch, 1996), and I solicited feedback and engaged in hermeneutic conversations with my interpretive doctoral colleagues and mentors (Koch, 1996). These conversations were very helpful. They pushed me further into the hermeneutic circle by helping me uncover interpretations I had not yet considered (Plager, 1994). In addition, I conducted follow-up interviews with participants to clarify and expand on my developing interpretations. Sometimes these inquiries were fruitless and led me in the wrong direction. However, I recognized, as researchers, we must be willing to go backwards and make mistakes, and trust that this process may at some point keep us from going in the wrong direction (Gardner, 2006). All of these activities helped me be mindful that I was researching what I intended, and that my findings reflected the original research question and purpose (Binding & Tapp, 2008).

In some forms of qualitative research, consulting participants at the analysis stage to

see if the interpretations reflect their original meaning ensures credibility. The quest to recapture the original meaning has obvious benefits in that it leads us to assume there can be one correct meaning. However, the difficulty with this theory is that it has not been able to adequately explain the history of competing interpretations that have existed, and continue to exist in the world. As such, this validation strategy is questioned in hermeneutic research and was not used in the study. Rather than attempting to reproduce meaning, hermeneutics focuses on co-producing it. Instead, credibility can be attained by allowing other readers to view the responses, not to provide an expert evaluation of truth, but as an opportunity to open the circle from the narrowness of my vision and preunderstandings. This approach to credibility honours the hermeneutic conviction that all questions can be answered differently, and these differences are generative in nature (Moules, 2000). It also reinforces the hermeneutic belief that

Understanding is an adventure and, like any other adventure, is dangerous. Because it is not satisfied with simply wanting to register what is there or said there but goes back to our guiding interests and questions, one has to concede that the hermeneutical experience has a far lower degree of certainty than that attained by the methods of the natural sciences. (Gadamer, 1997/2007, pp. 243-244)

Interpretations of Nothing

To Insinuate Oneself

To “insinuate oneself” typically has a negative connotation in Western society, as it is often thought of in terms of something deceptive or unscrupulous. According to the Oxford dictionary, to insinuate oneself means to gain a more favorable position through

deceitful manipulation (“Insinuate Oneself Into,” n.d.). Yet, insinuate is the word one of the new social workers from this study chose when describing his efforts to practice in a critical way. Once I investigated the original etymology of the word, I actually found it more fitting. It dates back to the sixteenth century and means to “bring in by windings and curvings.” It is the “entrance through a narrow way, an ingratiating of oneself” (“Insinuate,” n.d.).

The word insinuate is also connected to snakes and serpents. Snakes have the potential for great destruction. Their ability to remain concealed for long periods of time, and then strike without warning, inspires fear in many, not just their prey. The forked-tongue, which allows them to find and track their victims (Schwenk, 1994), is also used as an analogy to speak untruthfully or deceitfully (“With Forked Tongue,” n.d.). However, the snake’s story is not entirely one of surreptitious violence. Because of its ability to shed its skin in the spring, a snake also depicts rebirth. As with most disasters, there is always an opportunity for renewal. Consequently, the serpent is an ambivalent image, depicting both destruction and violence, or rebirth and renewal (Knox, 1950). As such, it is often used as “the figure for the animistic recovery of a larger consciousness” (S. Smith, 1991, p. 202). What has been recovered in this study is an understanding that practicing in a critical way is no longer simply seen as an experience of rising up and striking down. Instead, a new understanding of emancipatory practice is emerging.

It is that I really had to think differently about the role of leadership – of existing leadership and existing power structures – in affecting structural changes...Like I think that when I first learned about this stuff, like I kind of thought there would be ... like clients or like front line workers

rising up and, like, taking the reins of the system and making all the changes and everything, but the more of it I meet, like ... I don't meet very many clients in this job, I more meet front line workers, and the more obvious it is that they are like ... even the most dedicated and passionate ones are really struggling just to like, to get through their big, thick work load, you know?...And like, even the ones who probably identify structural or like take the AOP [Anti-Oppressive Practice] stuff to heart, they talk like extensively about how difficult it is to put these things into practice and find ... like find footholds and get support within their organization beyond lip service...

This understanding of practice involves new critical social workers finding various footholds and slowly insinuating their theories and practice into conservative ideology and practices that are also insinuating.

Destruction and Violence: Neoliberalism as an Insinuating Practice

A part of the philosophical hermeneutic project is to study how things in the world appear and at the same time are covered up. The Greek referred to this study of reality and truth as *Aletheia*. It is the dis-closing, un-covering, and dis-covering that which has been concealed. It is both the hiding and the revealing of the things themselves (Moran, 2000). Understanding the insinuating nature of domination and oppression is also an exercise in re-discovery. Hannah Arendt, a student of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, and a contemporary of Hans-Georg Gadamer, was deeply impacted by the totalitarianism and destruction of the first half of the twentieth century. Arendt proposed that philosophy emerges from the discrepancy between the world of appearances and the medium of words that support thinking. She discussed

the problem of totalitarianism, and believed that it would only be possible in a modern society if "...everything – including our sense of reality – is managed" (Moran, 2000, p. 299). Arendt believed language becomes a powerful tool in the maintenance of the status quo through the use of rhetoric. Because it relies on the art of persuasion, rhetoric is the ability to generate belief without knowledge. It also has the capacity to organize and discipline disparate individuals and groups (Fontana, 2005). As such, Arendt was very concerned with spin-doctors and speech manipulated by corporations in order to dominate our public space (Tremblay, 2003). Although Western nations pride themselves on their dedication to freedom and democracy for every individual, in reality we may not be as unshackled as we believe.

Curving and Winding: Deconstructing and Reconstructing Discourse

Like Arendt, Gadamer also spoke of rhetoric and common sense, *sensus communis*, however, Gadamer did not see these concepts as completely negative. Instead, Gadamer defended rhetoric by reminding his audiences that it has been a part of our social life since the days of Plato and the Sophists, when persuasion and public speaking were art forms. These were the days when rhetoric was part of a culture that created new and important understandings. As such, Gadamer approached both common sense and rhetoric as necessary in the development of a community (Krajewski, 1992), in that community is "...built not by the 'true' but by discussions of the 'probable,' and rhetoric deals in the 'probable' when proof is unavailable or inadequate" (Krajewski, 1992, p. 346).

The underlying assumption in Gadamer's rhetoric is that both actors enter into a genuine discourse, and no one person is meant to control the conversation. To be involved in

this type of genuine dialogue requires both a stance of indebtedness and critique, as well as trust and acceptance (Moran, 2000). This becomes problematic when individuals and groups in positions of authority and power introduce jargon and euphemisms into the conversation. When doublespeak becomes part of the dialogue, the potential for a genuine event of understanding is eliminated, as is the possibility for transformation. The Oxford dictionary defines doublespeak as “deliberately euphemistic, ambiguous, or obscure language” (“Doublespeak,” n.d.). It is the communicative art of being able to appear non-influencing, while being influencing (Epstein, 1999).

One of the new critical social workers in this study appeared to understand his practice in terms of an Aristotelian tradition of rhetoric. He definitely had an opinion, and wished to convince the service user of his thoughts and views. However, his practice was still an invitation in that he had made it accessible to the Other by un-covering and re-vealing the underlying meaning of the document they were studying.

...And so my role as advocate really becomes explaining in more accessible language for clients what their rights might be... I will help explain – what my understanding of what [the government organization] is asking for, and what is this question really trying to get at? This question is basically wanting to know whether or not your depression affects your ability to shower every day, and to what degree. Which most people don't understand, and they read the way the questions are worded – and the same with the Disability Tax Credit and a lot of the other things I help people with – it is really worded with the assumption of someone having a physical ability and applying for these things, not having a mental health disability. And so,

“Oh no, I can physically get up and shower. Yes, I physically can make dinner.” And I am, “Yah, no, that is not what they are asking,” right? I get them to fill in the form but I make sure and I help them to understand, “Well no, what they want to know is your depression or anxiety so debilitating that you are just not able to”? And they are like, “Oh, well, yes,” and then they can answer that question. They are not lying and I am not telling them to lie, I am just helping them re-understand or better understand the question.

What the participant has also just demonstrated is Fook’s (2002) description of translation. This is a practice where “workers might see part of their role as transforming bureaucratic culture by valuing and translating between different discourses” (pp. 147-148). It is the practice of naming different terms or categories in order to alert people (in this case a service user) to different perspectives (Fook, 2002). This new social worker became the interpreter by un-covering and re-vealing the doublespeak that was driving a bureaucratic agenda. At the same time, he was engaging in a dialogue that has the potential to create a new understanding of what it means to be someone living with depression, as opposed to someone who is diagnosed as depressed. This understanding moves beyond the beliefs held by the bureaucratic agency that created the mental health checklist.

Curving and Winding: Creating Space

In addition to concentrating on language and systems of oppression, a great deal of Hannah Arendt’s work focused on the possibility of creating space for action. For Arendt, the term *action* referred to the activities of humans that can only be conducted once the demands of life have been met, such as a stable world within which they can achieve both group identity and solidarity (Dietz,

1994). It is the collective condition where individuals are dependent on one another in order to achieve their true existence. Similar to Gadamer's requirements for having a genuine conversation, action is an activity that comes from without and, as such, can only exist in the world with others (Williams, 1998). It represents the activities needed to fend off our rising alienation (Dietz, 1994).

Arendt was very concerned with how modern society limits or restricts the space required to achieve action (Moran, 2000). As such, Arendt wrote considerably about the need for citizenship and participation in democracy, which in Greek is known as *polis*. "For Arendt the Greek *Polis* opened a space where humans could freely interact with one another" (Moran, 2000, p. 312). It is the space between people, or the condition that is needed for democracy and human freedom. It is the space where an emancipatory action may appear, and be recognized by the public (Moran, 2000).

Over the years, our *polis*, our space that exists between people and groups, has been reducing in size. In reality there is very little space left in the field of social work, just enough for technical fixes. The limited space has also made it more likely that the social work profession will focus on individual problems. When an individual who is seeking support is given the messages "you can do it, you can have it, it is up to you to pull yourself together to get the skills, to learn the stuff, get on with our life, do it!" (Epstein, 1999, p. 10), there is very little room for democratic action. Given the limited space to exercise citizenship and democratic participation, Arendt was acutely aware that not everyone is capable of action, since it involves risk. This is the "real world" box that many of us, at various stages of our lives and practice, find ourselves in. Instead, individuals who are inclined toward

action are those who want to make a new beginning (Moran, 2000).

Critical social work students are taught the importance of attempting to understand and create this democratic area. They are taught that their job requires more than just inquiring into someone's life (Chambon, 1999). Transformative knowledge and practice is meant to disturb commonly held beliefs and ways of doing. This action of creating democratic space involves engaging in a practice of working within and against the rules. The winding and curving of critical social work practice is an attempt to create the space to maneuver in the real world. It is the space through which to negotiate the hegemonic and destructive forces. As many know, organizational change is never easy. However, this new social worker described his practice of creating opportunities for new understanding at the management level of different human services agencies.

And they had a webinar for senior managers and they were using my research in the thing which was really cool and really nice to see them, like quoting sentences, so that is nice. But yah, folks said they really found it helpful and picked up ideas, you know? Every once in a while I will get a newsletter from an agency or a set of agencies that are merging and they will say, "Look, we read your thing and this is what we came up with."

He was also able to create some space in his own small, but growing organization.

Now we are a very small organization and I was the third employee they hired – they are only about four years old – so I'm currently working with a consultant to write all our organizational policies because we don't have any policies yet, because until a couple of years ago it was

all being run out of my boss' living room. Yah! It was like a very small ...And they ... so I have been trying to work like equity based policies into the policy framework so the organization has some... You know, it is a small thing, like three people, but I think that is good to try to ... try to ... because that is going to be the institutional memory to some degree, so I have been able to insinuate myself into kind of a critical junction in the organizational development. Yah, so I have been trying to slip ideas that I think are really important into the framework... So I will say, "Hey, what about this? Should we do this? Should we have some kind of socially responsible investment policy?" And he will say, "Yah, why not? Let's do that."

This participant was able to insinuate his critical ideas at an opportune time in other organizations and his own. Specifically, he was able to create space for critical ideas by identifying parts of the organizational system that were open to influence. In the business community, this is called a high impact strategy, which is meant to overcome organizational apathy and inertia (Godkin & Allcorn, 2008). He understood that it was important to act now while the organization is small and still developing. To wait meant his organization might be at risk of developing a policy memory that is solely focused on neoliberal ideology.

Curving and Winding: Approaching from the Bottom and the Top

Because there is such a strong focus on social justice in the critical social work field, there can be a risk for those practicing in the field to assume the moral high ground, and conceptualize critical practice as a war in which there are only two sides, those who are in favor of social change, and those who oppose it. This is what Fook (2002) called "dichotomous thinking" (p. 72). It involves practitioners constructing the self as the binary opposite of the other. This type of thinking can be quite harmful since it divides us all into enemies and allies. As noted by the participant below, he appeared to understand the need to avoid oppositional thinking. Despite some of the critical social work rhetoric he faced while in school, he managed to elude understanding his practice as an us versus them, or bottom versus top approach. Instead, he focused on searching for the opportunity for a slight transformation. Often the movement is small, a slight twist or bend. It is almost imperceptible.

... Well I guess another bias that I picked up at [the critical school] was like an aversion to marketing and like anything that has to deal with the business side of social service stuff. I had a prof who was really, really good at it – the prof I had at [a non critical social work program] was really good –...Something she was really big on was marketing your skills as a social worker, and really taking that step to brand yourself essentially...Now this was like in the context of health social work or places where social workers are like guests in the system, like hospitals. And...like, a lot of people don't know why we are at hospitals and a lot of staff at hospitals don't really understand why social workers are there. And from what I understand there is a lot of, like, I guess, there is just a lot of tension. And social workers often feel like they have to justify why they are there and that brings a lot of resentment, I guess...Yah, so her whole thing was if you are going to be in a place like that you can't expect, you know, like a doctor who is given all the power and all the glory to just get why you are there. And you have to like, actively identify people who don't get it and who are powerful and like, get them on your side, you

... Well I guess another bias that I picked up at [the critical school] was like an aversion to marketing and like anything that has to deal with the business side of social service stuff. I had a prof who was really, really good at it – the prof I had at [a non critical social work program] was really good –...Something she was really big on was marketing your skills as a social worker, and really taking that step to brand yourself essentially...Now this was like in the context of health social work or places where social workers are like guests in the system, like hospitals. And...like, a lot of people don't know why we are at hospitals and a lot of staff at hospitals don't really understand why social workers are there. And from what I understand there is a lot of, like, I guess, there is just a lot of tension. And social workers often feel like they have to justify why they are there and that brings a lot of resentment, I guess...Yah, so her whole thing was if you are going to be in a place like that you can't expect, you know, like a doctor who is given all the power and all the glory to just get why you are there. And you have to like, actively identify people who don't get it and who are powerful and like, get them on your side, you

know? Show them why you are valuable in terms that they can understand why you are valuable, which is really like a kind of ... it is using all your social work skills in a professional context, right? So I thought that was really, really brilliant because if ... if you want to increase the ... I think social workers have a lot of ... we have a lot of like, value to bring to any workplace and especially the ones where people don't think we are valuable. You know, where people aren't in crises all the time.

This participant is actively engaging in changing the perception of some individuals who are in positions of power. To do so, he appears to understand he needs to use the methods of the “enemy,” such as branding. According to the online Business Dictionary, *branding* is a business marketing process that involves “...creating a unique name and image for a product in the consumers’ mind, mainly through advertising campaigns with a consistent theme. Branding aims to establish a significant and differentiated presence in the market that attracts and retains loyal customers” (“Branding,” n.d.). In this case, the participant was focused on creating an image of a social worker as a valuable asset to any organization, whether the agency is involved with acute cases or not. In addition, he understood he needed to target individuals in positions of power and authority in order to spread this message to others and create a loyal following. This new social worker described several instances in his practice where he curved and wound his critical practices and knowledge around the exclusionary practices of his hierarchical and bureaucratic organization by utilizing mainstream methods his audience could appreciate.

Rebirth and Renewal: Shedding

Rarely is destruction seen as a positive or hope(ful) proposition. However, Hannah Arendt spoke of the hope or opportunity that comes at the end. She believed that “...every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only ‘message’ which the end can ever produce” (Arendt, 1951, p. 478). In order to challenge existing hegemony and achieve ideational change, a new philosophy is needed, one that involves deconstructing and challenging our own power and authority as social workers, and reconstructing it to be productive (Healy & Leonard, 2000). Transformative practice approaches the current hegemonic state as inherently social, rather than natural (Robinson, 2005), and as such recognizes that it can be changed.

Similar to its philosophical ancestors, critical social work practice is also focused on rebirth and transformation. “A critical reflective approach holds the potential for emancipatory practices (Fook, 1999) in that it first questions and disrupts dominant structures and relations and lays the ground for change” (Fook, 2002, p. 41). A part of freeing ourselves from hegemonic forces is expending an effort to free us from Gramsci’s “common sense” (Robinson, 2005), as this participant demonstrated when she questioned other social work colleagues’ sense of fatalism - - the belief that the world has been, and will always be, the same.

[social workers] often think of what is available, which is never enough. It is never going to be adequate and it is not ... it is not okay to stop there and I think that if we stop dreaming big and actually saying, “This is what the people need”, rather than, “This is what you can have”, there won't ever be changes. Right?

Gramsci discussed the possibility of transformative practice in his concept of “good sense.” It is the critique of common sense that comes from within the subaltern group that has escaped dominant philosophies. Good sense is too minimal to create a new philosophy (Robinson, 2005), but it has a criticality that allows for disruption of common sense and the current status quo. As such, good sense may be seen as the starting point to something larger (Robinson, 2005). It is “the beginnings of the new world, rough and jagged though they always are...” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 343). It is the type of sense-making activity that brings the promise for something more.

Rebirth and Renewal: Rebuilding

Similar to Gadamer’s genuine conversation, the consciousness-raising process is meant to be a mutual one, based on respect and a genuine desire to impact and be impacted by the other. Consciousness-raising involves sharing expertise, learning from one another, and joint action (Allan, 2003). Critical social workers are taught to approach this type of practice from a voluntaristic, rather than deterministic, stance (Fook, 2002). When working with colleagues, the practice involves negotiating multiple meanings, and recognizing the many different ways of knowing and understanding. Most importantly, it involves having an attitude of respect and excellent active listening skills (Allan, 2003). All of these practices involve the subtle, small, but deliberate, movements that expose the falseness of the view of the world from the top.

When people are debriefing or discussing, or writing case notes that is where I think that my skills kind of pop up and that is where I start going, “Well did you ever think about this”? ... Like there was one kid and they were all talking about how

they couldn’t believe that the mom – she was a single mom – was reading her six – six or seven [year old] – Stephen King novels, and that was his bedtime stories and there was a lot of pathologizing going on over what kind of mother she was, blah, blah, blah. So I just kind of threw it out there, “Well have you ever thought about the fact that maybe” – they were in extreme poverty – “she can’t afford to buy numerous books? She is either ...” – they were an indigenous family – “... maybe she was never raised in a family where they had children’s books read to her so maybe she doesn’t actually even make that connection that, you know, they might be [inappropriate], or maybe she is struggling so much the only time she gets to read or stop and sit down” – because the kid was super hyperactive – “she wants to read her own book because she is sick and tired of reading kid’s books and the kid will only sit down if she is reading to him so she reads him her books, and she is just not making those connections that Stephen King is a little gory for a six year old.” You know? It might not be that she is actually trying to harm her kid, or a neglectful parent, or whatnot. Like there might be misunderstandings or lack of resources, like there are all these other options and she might just need to be re-directed that, “Here is a few children’s books, why don’t you read these to him”? You know? “Or help him”? You know? “You do half an hour of reading with him and then he has to figure out some time he can do something on his own so that you can read for half an hour.” So just little miniscule things.

The “little miniscule things” means having the will to question or resist dominant discourses, and create the space to encourage others to follow suit. As Fook (2002) suggested, these destructive discourses are only as

powerful to the degree to which they go unquestioned. In this case, the participant rejected the “bad mother” discourse and searched for other plausible explanations. She also found the space to encourage her colleagues to see the possibility of a different interpretation. This is the conversation that has the potential to transform a “bad mom” into a human being in need of a bit of time, and a few resources. This critical social worker was attempting to create a new understanding, one where the perspectives of individuals on the margins are no longer subjugated or disruptive, but instead are the perspectives that are also constitutive and primary (Hartsock, 1990).

Instead of searching for a totalizing solution or grand fix, the “little miniscule things,” the slight action, or the small questions might become the opportunity for rebirth and transformation. New critical social work graduates, because of the limited expectations others have for them and they sometimes have for themselves, in some ways have the luxury of moving in small steps, rather than always expecting to save the world in one heroic leap. It is more about making space in the world than it is about completely altering the world in which we are. A study conducted by Whitmore, Calhoun, and Wilson (2011) investigated the question “how do you know you are making a difference?” (p. 437). This was an advocacy project focused on changing policies, laws, practices, and improving citizen engagement in Canada. In this study, the researchers found their participants were also keen to celebrate all small endeavors in an effort to avoid getting bogged down by the bureaucracy and uncertainty of their work (Whitmore et al., 2011).

These new critical social work graduates appear to understand that there is no complete and total fix to our current world state. While always in motion, their movements are

deliberate, slow, undulating. Perhaps the movement inspires more of a hybridization of our current understanding, instead of understanding their practice as something that must fix the world, or save others. A new critical understanding of practice might include reflexive deconstruction and reconstruction motions. This is an understanding where critical social workers might act as both translators and scholars interested in having a genuine conversation. Although they are wary of the ideology and practices of those in positions of power, it is also a practice that includes using some of the mainstream tools to overcome the problems of subjugation. Finally, this understanding might help new graduates find some satisfaction with the small movements, while still looking for opportunities for greater change.

Postmodern critical social work approaches have refocused from broader political and structural problems, to more local forms of change in an effort to allow more individuals and groups to be part of the continuum of social change. These small-scale localized activities are still respected for their radical potential. In addition, structural approaches to social work practice do not endorse one particular way of working over another. This is due to “...a dialectical view that the personal and political are fundamentally connected, working with individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities are all regarded as containing possibilities for practice” (Allan, 2003, p. 53). As with the serpent analogy, there can be no dichotomous understanding here. Although there is overt and covert manipulation and destruction, there is also the opportunity for new growth and transformation through the slow, steadfast curving and winding through our current reality.

Although these small insinuating movements are effective at weaving through

contrary and dominant ideology and practice, they are always at risk of being lost or scattered without the opportunity to build social cohesion and combat isolation (Allan, 2003). One of the great merits of a neo-liberal ideology is its ability to ontologically hijack ambivalent or diffused agendas (Carey, 2009). In order to continue these small insinuating movements, perhaps what is needed is more opportunity to discuss these “little miniscule things” with other like-minded social workers. This might be the only opportunity for these little dialogues to turn into more comprehensive conversations, and bigger ideas.

Finding Something

The question of nothing can only arise if there is already some understanding of what “it” is (Bowie, 2010). As such, the field of social work may not necessarily be concerned with what new critical social work graduates are, but instead what we can do with them. Many critical social work educators

...strive to facilitate learning environments that privilege: the active creation of collective knowledge over the passive giving and receiving of pre-determined knowledge; contradiction over certainty, surfacing assumptions over learning “the facts,” searching for understanding over finding the truth; exploring questions over finding answers; staying with discomfort over seeking comfort; dialoguing over debating; working collaboratively over working competitively. (Campbell & Baikie, 2012, p. 78)

Still, we know the educational practices are falling short of this ideal due to pressures to conform to neoliberal ideology, epistemology, and practices.

Unfortunately, for the new critical social work graduates, much of what they can do

does not fit into a neat knowledge application box. Perhaps we are fools to believe we are looking at *nothing*. Instead, human service organizations or social workers steeped in a neoliberal mindset might simply be blind to what critical social work graduates are, and what they have to offer. Specifically, Margolin (1997) has argued “...that social workers blind themselves to how professional practice perpetuates and expands social injustice in order to do what we do” (as cited in Olson, 2007, p. 60).

Individual social workers and human service organizations that are steeped in neoliberal ideology and practice are powerful in their stance and pursuit of conditions of certainty. However, their persistence has not eradicated other ways of knowing and other ways of practicing. Philosophical hermeneutics helps us recognize that the self exists in a multiplicity of unfathomable and unstable relationships. Because of the nature of our current understanding of reality and perspective, many who are blind might not be aware of this type of non-mainstream presence (Davey, 2006). As such, for some who are blind, the practice experiences of critical social workers have no essence.

As a field, we might have also blinded ourselves. However, there are those who are willing to see this nothingness as something other than a vacuous abyss. For these individuals, this space might be interpreted as a generative one, as *aletheia*. It is a space that makes room for the emergence of new interpretations and new practices.

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