Challenging 'Othering' in Social Work:

Deconstructing 'Us' and 'Them'

Aggie Bezzina, MSW, Ph.D

University of Bristol



My background ...

Originally from Malta

Masters in Social Work – University of Nottingham

• Experience in SW practice, management, education and research

PhD Social Work – University of Nottingham

Senior Lecturer – University of Bristol



Malta ...

- Located at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, 60 miles south of Italy and 180 miles north of North African coast
- Population of approximately 550,000
- Area of 122 square miles
- 10th smallest country by area and fifth most densely populated sovereign country
- Has been inhabited since approximately 5900BC





BRISTOL ...

- The largest city in South West England
- One of the 11 'Core Cities' in the United Kingdom
- 90 minutes from London
- A population of 479,200 (mid-2022)

The population of Bristol is increasingly diverse with at least 45 religions, 185 countries of birth, 287 different ethnic groups and 90 main languages (Census 2021)

https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/1840-bristol-key-facts-2022/file





This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

- □ Founded in 1876
- ☐ First HEI in England to admit women on an equal basis to men
- □ 55th in the World (QS World University Rankings 2024)
- 5th in the UK for research (THE analysis of REF 2021)





This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

Social Work

MSc 2 years full-time

5th in the UK (Complete University Guide)

Focus of today's lecture ...

Theorising 'Othering'

'Othering' in social work

Challenging 'Othering' in social work

Origins of my interest in 'Othering'

SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK: EMERGENT DYNAMICS IN THE MALTESE CONTEXT

AGNES BEZZINA, MSW, BA (Hons)

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

JUNE 2014

What was shared in interviews

Some professional interviewees cited examples of social workers lacking basic respect towards service users, at times disregarding the humanity of services users:

"How can you relate on an equal level with a client when you believe that the client's objective is to milk the system?"

(social worker)

"We tend to gossip about clients in a manner that is not respectful towards them as human beings."

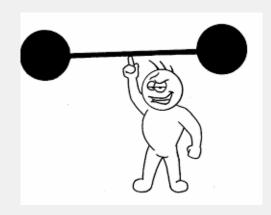
(social worker)



US

THEM

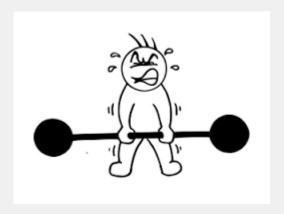
The professional



altruistic, strong, healthy, cognisant, decisive professional, whose personal life is problem-free



The service user



possibly self-interested, weak, infirm, unknowledgeable, doubtful, and whose life is taken over by personal problems

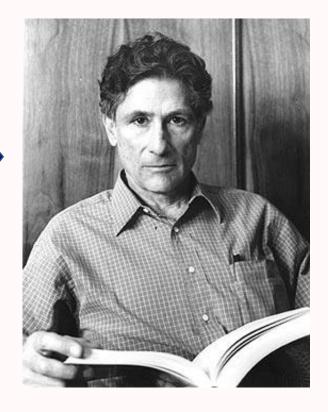


Gayatri Spivak

'Othering' coined by Gayatri Spivak to denote the process by which imperialism created 'others' by stressing differences and depicting such differences as deficiencies.

Often also linked to Edward
Said's seminal book
'Orientalism' in which he
discusses how the West created
the orient as 'the other', as a
binary opposite.

Edward Said



Theories of 'othering'

Othering refers to: "a dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation that draws a line between 'us' and 'them', which establishes, maintains, and justifies social distance. It's closely associated with and reinforced by the related social processes of stereotyping and stigmatisation. It is not a neutral line for it is imbued with negative value judgements that diminish and construct 'the poor' variously as a source of moral contamination, a threat to be feared, an 'undeserving' economic burden, an object of pity or even as an exotic species."

(Lister, 2019)



How does othering manifest itself?

Objectification

 Reducing people to mere stereotypes composed of negative features

De-contextualization

Focusing on an issue while ignoring wider context and structures

De-historicization

 Ignoring the potential impact of people's history on their present realities

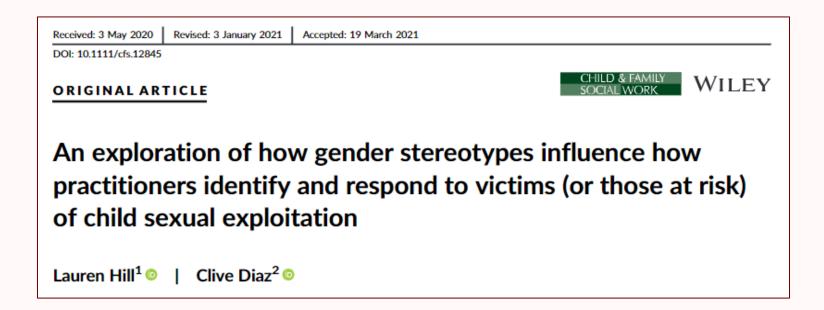
De-authorization

 Writing / talking about people in a way which is devoid of their voice

Adapted from Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012)

Objectification

The impact of stereotypes and biases ... Example from social work:



"...as a result of gender stereotypes, practitioners may be less likely and/or slower to identify males as victims and may be less likely to provide males with supportive multi-agency responses."

(Hill and Diaz 2021, p.642)

De-contextualization

JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE 2023, VOL. 37, NO. 2, 183–197 https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2023.2199195







Child abuse, the narrative of parents living in poverty: a critical analysis of parental and professional explanations of why a child was harmed

Debbie Innes-Turnill (1)



"Professionals missed poverty at a macro level by focusing on the micro processes, leading to explanations of the abuse as personal inadequacy rather than systemic issues." (Innes-Turnill 2023, p.183)

Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Systems: A Systematic Review of Definitions and Core Components

Christopher Edward Branson New York University School of Medicine Carly Lyn Baetz
Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

Sarah McCue Horwitz and Kimberly Eaton Hoagwood New York University School of Medicine

De-historicization

Common practices within juvenile detention and corrections facilities, such as strip searches, secure confinement with restricted family contact, and the use of seclusion or restraint, were found to retraumatize youth with a history of trauma.

(Branson, Baetz, Horwitz & Hoagwood, 2017)

CHILD & FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00895.x

'My life's been a total disaster but I feel privileged': care-leavers' access to personal records and their implications for social work practice

Suellen Murray* and Cathy Humphreys†

"The negative aspects of the records were that, typically, at least in part, they were incomplete, insulting, incorrect and/or incomprehensible."

(Murray & Humphreys 2014, p.215)

De-authorization



Resisting Othering

 establishment of context, historical grounding, and retrieval of the individual's subjective experience building trust and collaboration acts against objectification and dehistoricization by bringing in the person's history and knowledge bringing to the forefront own feelings, experiences, and history, demonstrating own processes of interpretation

Narrative



Dialogue



Reflexivity



Adapted from Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012)

The power of narrative & dialogue

- people find meaning by constructing stories from their experiences
- stories are shaped by countless variables such as history, geography, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomics, education ...
- narrative and dialogue create a powerful space for collaboration, allowing us to work with people to uncover deeper meaning in their experiences, and can unlock new perspectives

(McTighe, 2018)



What does 'reflexivity' mean to you?



| | | Critical Reflection | | Reflexivity |
|--------------------------|---------------|---|--------------------|--|
| Event | | What happened? | \Rightarrow | How did I influence what happened? |
| Purpose / cause | | Why did it happen? | | Why did I behave in that way? |
| Feelings | \Rightarrow | How was I feeling? | | Why might I have felt the way I did then, and now, when reflecting on it? |
| Assumptions / Influences | | What were my assumptions? What informed my assumptions? | | How has who I am affected my view of what happened, my values, opportunities and life choices, and subsequently my reflection? |
| Changes | \Rightarrow | What needs to change? What can I do next time? | \rightarrow | What beliefs or ways of challenging my assumptions will allow me to look at this from others' perspectives? |

Questions to prompt Reflection and Reflexivity (Ingham et al, cited in Sicora, 2017, p.129)

Key Takeaways

SHARED HUMANITY

Humanization

Situating

Historicization

Validation

Objectification

De-contextualization

De-historicization

De-authorization

OTHERING



References

- Branson, C. E., Baetz, C. L., Horwitz, S. M. C., & Hoagwood, K. E. (2017). Trauma-informed juvenile justice systems: A systematic review of definitions and core components. Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 9(6), 635–646. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000255
- Hill, L., & Diaz, C. (2021). An exploration of how gender stereotypes influence how practitioners identify and respond to victims (or those at risk) of child sexual exploitation. Child and Family Social Work, 26(4), 642–651. https://doi.org/10.1111/CFS.12845
- Innes-Turnill, D. (2023). Child abuse, the narrative of parents living in poverty: a critical analysis of parental and professional explanations of why a child was harmed Debbie Innes-Turnill. Journal of Social Work Practice, 37(2), 183–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2023.2199195
- Krumer-Nevo, M., & Sidi, M. (2012). Writing against othering. Qualitative Inquiry, 18(4), 299–309. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411433546
- Lister, R. (2019, May 21). "The art of ignoring the poor" ATD Fourth World UK. https://atd-uk.org/2019/05/31/ruth-lister-the-art-of-ignoring-the-poor/
- McTighe, J. P. (2018). Narrative Theory in Clinical Social Work Practice. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70787-7
- Murray, S., & Humphreys, C. (2014). "My life's been a total disaster but I feel privileged": Care-leavers' access to personal records and their implications for social work practice. Child and Family Social Work, 19(2), 215–224. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00895.x
- Sicora, A. (2017). Reflective Practice and Learning from Mistakes in Social Work. Policy Press.