

## How words can bind us or set us free – how changing the narrative around trauma can lead to transformative social work practice

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### Introduction

To start I must state my positioning in this topic, while using autoethnographic research, the research of yourself, the first role, it to explore how I relate to the research. Like many social workers, I came into social work due to my history of trauma. My childhood was marked by severe trauma, impacting my sense of safety, identity, and voice. In my 20s, I faced the toll of surviving this trauma, and during my healing journey I encountered professionals that supported my desire to help support those that have walked a similar journey. I wanted to be the voice for those who felt silenced. However, early in my career, I faced situations that mirrored my past—where my background was suppressed rather than seen as strength. This led to vicarious trauma and burnout. With supportive supervision, I found my voice and became determined to advocate for others. Hence my research and this article that stems from my passion to share a more empowering narrative around those of us that chose social work out of deep personal understanding of trauma.

### Findings

Finding straightforward themes became one of the most complex parts of this research project. My journey and my narrative could not fit nicely into boxes, and as such, it was an area that I resisted. Finally I settled on exploring my research from the framework of understanding the “who,” “why,” “what,” and “how” of qualitative research (Brigitte, 2015). The information below shows how my **Why**, thoughts around “there is a plan,” “there is a reason,” and making sense of why my trauma and the feelings that came out of that led me on a path to social work. This leads into the **What**, exploring how my strengths, values, and resilience lead to transformation, even with the contradictions within the social work education and practice space. This then leads into the **How**, which is around how to change the narrative and the themes that explore how this can occur.

## Why – My why and the echoes within social work education and practice

*“is what brought me into social work the reason I get out of social work?”*

It was the start of many why questions - why did I suffer through trauma? Why did that lead me to social work? Moreover, why does that make social work harder but more accessible for me simultaneously? I had learnt through my social work education the significant research on the negative impact of trauma on individuals and the adverse outcomes that come from this. These impacts include negative outcomes on development, psychologically, relationships, attachment, social functioning, and health outcomes (Doyle & Cicchetti, 2017; Felitti, 2002; Finkelhor et al., 2013; Kalmakis & Chandler, 2014). This however was not what I wanted to focus on. My research was to look at my own journey and see how my growth and learning around a different narrative could support transformative practice.

My initial findings around those questions of why, became about the interwoven feelings of shame, silence, and the language that ensures that I stayed in a box that ensured I conformed.

*“I think about my life and think about always feeling like I was in a box, a box where I conformed to the needs and wants of others. I never felt like I could just be; I was always thinking of others and ensuring that I conformed to stay safe”*

My research found links around language, and the impact this had when I reflected on my learning about trauma. This context became an area that focused on the negative; words like vulnerable, challenged, harmful, risk and a breakdown of well-being were often used about trauma and the clients I was learning to serve. Van Breda (2018) and Coupal (2013) discuss the language used within the trauma context. This language supports a narrative of how adversity and harm can lead to issues around disclosure and mimics how exploitation occurred. It was with this knowledge that I reflected on the language used as a practitioner, and as I heard, my stories echoed within theirs. I connected the dots that what is linked with the language of the client’s trauma can also be linked to mine.

*“My childhood made me aware of the words and actions of others in power and that I needed to match these if I wanted to be safe”*

My research showed the power of those who used this language and those who had power over me. This power over that occurred as a child became mirrored as I journeyed through my education and early social work career. I learned from the language of those with the power to pass or fail me within my social work degree and then the people who could impact my work life that the best thing to do was match the language they shared. However, over time, the importance of my values around injustice

and indignity became apparent. I soon realised that I was fighting against the values, ethics, and foundations of why I became a social worker.

*“Learning to voice the alternative of the negative narrative was a turning point for me. I started to educate myself about the contradictions of the negative learning I was having. These powerful, positive narratives impacted how I saw myself and how I came to see my work as a social worker”*

Through the exhaustion of fighting these negative narratives, the need to do things differently, and a change in my support system, I started to see an alternative space. A space where I could be authentic and my history was seen as positive, which led to a shift in what I was doing and how I was feeling, and a transformation occurred.

### **What: The journey that led to transformation despite the contradictions**

*“I think about what made me passionate about strength-based practice and fighting injustice. It comes down to my inner need to hold fast to my strengths, values, and morals not only to support my wellbeing but also to fight for the wellbeing of others”*

The role my strengths, values, and morals had on the transformation journey. Several reflections focused on when my well-being was at its worst within my social work journey and how this was when my strengths, values, and morals were being challenged. It was during the fight for my well-being and the resistance around the language and narrative being told that I started looking for alternative narratives that upheld the strengths and values that came from my childhood trauma. The negative narrative of trauma within social work education, ideas around the wounded healer, ACE, and unresolved emotional issues. When you add this to the narrative around mental illness that often is interwoven within a trauma history, I heard a narrative that something was wrong with me and, as such, needed to be managed.

*“When that narrative changed, and social work became more about risk, I was quickly put into this category, and the same things that I thought made me a great social worker became a risk. All of a sudden, there were discussions around my triggers, my risk of burnout, and a need to manage my emotional responses”*

However, upon changing the narrative, I started to look at this from another angle; as Escalante (2020) supported, I realised that my mental health symptoms were responses to adversity. This change in my internal narrative responses overcame the negative narrative within the context of the social work practice that causes suffering. It was within changing this narrative that I started on a journey of transformation. Helmick (2022) discusses the need to transform trauma memory into something  
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healthy, productive, and new to uphold resilience. Within this, I thought about how my transformation could have occurred earlier if the narrative had differed within my social work education and early employment. Helmick (2022) supports this by encouraging a focus on how teachers could discuss, support, and educate students around resilience and resistance and a focus on our strengths as individuals. Would we not only see a change in the students themselves around their resilience but also could we see a change in practice and possibly support resilience as a way to combat burnout?

### How: The road to changing the narrative to transform practice

*“I have struggled over the years to know who I was. I had been told who I needed to be for those who held power over me. It was not until I started taking some of that power back through changing my narrative that I realised I had my power”*

There is power within the narrative when discussing abuse, trauma, family violence, or within society, i.e., racism, oppression, and colonization within the education and employment context. Palmer (2009) discusses how we need to ensure that both negative and positive narratives around these are encouraged so that those of us who see ourselves within these spaces can see the strengths, uniqueness, and power that these experiences have given us. Those with the power within these spaces can ensure conversations and systems that focus on strengths, favourable outcomes, connections, and narratives that encourage growth. Dykes (2016) continues the support of this finding and how a focus on positive narratives can lead to social workers who are self-aware, reflective, and resilient. Then, the culture within social work becomes one where we explore adverse experiences from both the context of negative and positive outcomes.

### Discussion: The importance of the narrative

*“The stories we tell make the world. If you want to change the world, you need to change your story” (Margolis, 2014, p.14)*

The findings within this research further support the above quote, that the narrative we hear in our heads, alongside the narratives we hear from those around us, impact our world. It is essential to explore both sides of the narrative. Through this, you ensure that you encourage critical reflection around the personal narratives that either serve or do not serve the purpose of those who came into social work practice (Newcomb et al., 2015). The point of this research was to reinforce the narrative around the strengths, values, and resilience that come from the suffering of trauma. I have found the importance of aligning my lived experience, social work education, and social work practice with Social work values (ANZASW, 2019). As such, one of these values, Mātātoa, resonates with me, as MacDonald: How words can bind us or set us free – how changing the narrative around trauma can lead to transformative social work practice.

I/we needed the moral courage to critically reflect on areas that are uncomfortable and challenging and work through the contradictions and complexities that occurred. We have a responsibility under the social work value of Manaakitanga and Aroha to ensure our own and others wellbeing, to strengthen mana-enhancing relationships where we can belong in a space where we are safe and treated with respect, kindness, and compassion (ANZASW,2019). It is within the narrative of our social work values as a foundation that I believe we can ensure change, not only for those we serve but also for ourselves.

## Recommendations

The recommendations from my journey through this research are, firstly, no matter what the trauma is, there needs to be healing before we can ever believe we can support the healing of others. The narrative we tell ourselves around the trauma can be reinforced within the social work context. As such, it is firstly our responsibility to ensure that this does not negatively impact our emotional responses and, therefore, our social work practice. My Second recommendation is around the responsibility of those who have power and knowledge within social work education and employment to share both narratives to ensure that future social workers hear not only the negatives that can occur but also the strengths that come from adversity. My third recommendation is that for all social workers if we stand on a foundation of our social work values, we cannot go wrong not only for those we serve but for ourselves, our colleagues, and other social workers.

## Conclusion

*"Stories save your life, and stories are your life. Stories can be both prison and crowbar. Breaking stories, breaking the silence, making new stories, rewriting stories, liberation" (Solnit, 2017).*

I want to end with how this research started, with heartache and trauma. Through the telling of my story, despite the pain it brought, it also gave me the power of the narrative, an innate knowledge of myself, my journey, and why I became a social worker. The inspiration that I now hold for this research is that in finding this power, this story and knowledge may start a narrative that impacts the narratives of those who serve alongside me and, therefore, strengthen the community that we uphold.

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