Narrative and Rhetoric in Social Work Education

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Abstract

This article starts from the narrative turn in the humanities and the social sciences in general and social work in particular to explore the study of fictional narratives in social work education. Rhetoric is presented as an important perspective for social work by focusing on the work of the rhetorician and literary critic Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), specifically on his theory of dramatism. The dramatistic pentad is introduced as an analytical tool to study fictional narratives. In a case study, a play and a film by a Dutch–Flemish theatre collective are jointly analysed by students from the Master of Social Work and Welfare Studies programme at a Flemish university. This rhetorical perspective gives social work students the opportunity not only to study fictional narratives, but also to reflect upon their own practice.

Keywords: narrative, social constructionism, social work education

Introduction

The narrative turn in the human and social sciences can be related to different but similar trends: a linguistic, cultural, anthropological, ethnographic, rhetorical turn. These turns emphasise the importance of symbols in the
construction of reality and more specifically the cultural construction of meaning both through language and narratives. From this perspective, reality is created by the symbols we use, especially the larger structures such as drama or narrative into which these symbols are arranged (Brummett, 2006). There is an expanding body of research on the importance of the study of language and narratives for social work practice, research and education (e.g. White and Epston, 1990; Holland and Kilpatrick, 1993; Kelley, 1995; Parton and O’Byrne, 2000; Shaw and Gould, 2001; McDrury and Alterio, 2003; Riessman and Quinney, 2005; Wilks, 2005; Lehmann, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Wilks (2005, p. 1249), for example, explores the applicability of narrative approaches to social work practice, ‘particularly in the light of an increasing interest in narratives as a basis for practice in intervention’. Specifically, the work of Parton and O’Byrne (2000) on constructive social work is embedded in this focus on the study of language and narrative.

From a similar perspective, Taylor (2006) applies techniques from narrative and discourse analysis to study reflective practice accounts, which are often used in social work education. She stresses that ‘social work practitioners, educators and academics need to employ a reflexive approach to their knowledge in order to achieve a critical awareness of their own processes and products’ (Taylor, 2006, p. 192). Moreover, Taylor argues that social work has ‘much to learn from sociology, ethnography and literary criticism about the stylistics, and rhetorical properties of communicative practices in social work’ (Taylor, 2006, p. 204, our emphasis).

In this article, we explore the potential of a rhetorical analysis of fictional narratives for achieving this kind of reflexive approach and critical awareness. First, the focus is on the narrative turn in discussing the theory of constructive social work. Second, rhetoric is presented as an important perspective for social work education by focusing on the work of the rhetorician and literary critic Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), specifically on his theory of dramatism. The dramatistic pentad is introduced as an analytical tool to study (fictional) narratives. Third, the use of fictional narratives as cultural tools in social work education is explored in a case study.

**Narrative and rhetoric in social work**

Parton and O’Byrne (2000, p. 7) developed constructive social work to ‘(re)value the importance of . . . detailed and critical analysis of the meaningfulness of language and narrative’ for social work. This focus on language and narrative starts from constructionist perspectives on social reality. From this perspective, individuals ‘create social worlds through their linguistic symbolic activity’ by interacting with others and participating in social worlds (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 16). A central thesis of constructionism is that ‘social identities depend on audience ascriptions’ (Lynch, 1998, cited in Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 14) and, as a
consequence, this approach recognises ‘the rhetorical aspects of construction, in that it is partly a process of persuading one’s self and others that one’s rendering of social reality is more legitimate or credible than any other’ (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, pp. 16–17, original emphasis). This ‘rhetorical-responsive’ version of social constructionism moves away from a referential or representational understanding of language by focusing on ‘how talk and language can have the effect of moving people to action and changing their views and perceptions’ (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 18, original emphasis).

This theory is a reaction to a positivistic evidence-based paradigm and a dominant management discourse in the profession. It critiques the increasing subjection of social workers to fixed procedures and goals aimed at specific outcomes. Problems are increasingly solved in a bureaucratic manner and functionality is of major importance at the expense of creativity and inter-human skills. In contrast, constructive social work argues that ‘notions of ambiguity, indeterminacy and uncertainty are at the core of social work and should be built upon and not defined out and thereby open up the potential for creativity and novel ways of thinking and acting’ (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 44). This implies for social work education that ‘uncertainty is the domain of the educated professional’ (Howe, 1995, cited in Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 44). Practice cannot only be based on a technical and rational approach because practice situations are characterised by ‘complexity, messiness and ambiguity’ (Taylor, 2006, p. 191) and social workers are stimulated into reflection-in-action to be able to deal with this complexity and ambiguity.

There is a vast literature about the reflective practitioner in general (Schön, 1983, 1987; Steier, 1991; McKernan, 1996; Moon, 1999) and the relevance of reflexivity for social work in particular (Sheppard et al., 2000; Stepney, 2006; Man Lam et al. 2007; D’Cruz et al., 2007). Concepts such as ‘reflexivity’ and ‘reflection’ have a variety of meanings (for an overview, see D’Cruz et al., 2007), but advocates of reflective practice argue that ‘significant dimensions of “theory” are implicit in action’ (Taylor, 2006, p. 191). In discussing the relationship between theory and practice in and for social work, Parton (2000) suggests that the work of Kenneth Burke appears as useful, because ‘Burke never separated action from contemplation... and in doing so, Burke helped recover the classical relationship between theoria and praxis through a realization of theory’s practical power’ (Parton, 2000, p. 461, original emphasis). In this article, we elaborate on Parton’s (2000) suggestion to focus on the work of Kenneth Burke and we aim to take this argument further by discussing more extensively key concepts of Burke’s work and by introducing rhetoric as a major perspective for social work education. The focus is not only on what the rhetorical analysis of language and narrative implies for understanding social reality and human behaviour, but also on how these perspectives can be used ‘to develop concepts and insights for practice’ (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 2, original emphasis).
Rhetoric and drama

The American rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), was an influential literary theorist of the twentieth century. His main perspectives were literary and rhetorical, but he also influenced history, philosophy and the social sciences (Wess, 1996). Burke (1966) described human beings as symbol-using animals and he approached human action as fundamentally rhetorical. It is not possible to avoid rhetoric, because ‘when we speak, act, dress, eat, and generally conduct our lives we communicate and, in doing so, persuade others, including ourselves’ (Gusfield, 1989, p. 17). This implies that human action always involves an actor and an audience. Therefore, Burke believes that the need for drama is an essential aspect of the human being, not just an affectation that some people have, but a basic need that all people share. He developed the theory of dramatism and the dramatistic pentad as an analytical tool to study human motives based on terms derived from the study of drama. Burke uses the concept of ‘drama’ to understand human activity ‘as involved in conflict, in purpose, in change’ (Gusfield, 1989, p. 9).

Humans find themselves in the midst of the Burkean pentad of act (what happens), agent (the one who does the act), scene (the setting in which an act takes place), agency (the means by which the act is carried out) and purpose (the goal or objective of the act). In his later works, Burke added a sixth term, attitude (the agent’s attitude toward the act), thus changing the pentad into a hexad. The questions (the who, what, when, where, and why of a situation) are a useful tool for analysing a dramatic situation in general, but become more powerful when we combine the key terms to construct ratios.

A ratio pairs two of the key terms and helps to define how the first term affects the second one. For example, a scene–act ratio focuses on the interpretation of acts in terms of scene: ‘... when social workers argue that individual problems are the result of the environmental conditions within which individuals act and design treatment technologies or advocate social programmes to solve such problems, they are accounting for action by emphasizing the central importance of scene’ (Knapp, 1999, p. 592, our emphasis). These ratios stimulate interesting questions about what is going on in a particular narrative or drama and provide specific help to understand the motives for why people act as they do. The main aim of Burke was to tease out the motive of social interactions—the motive being the reasons why people do the things they do: ‘... what is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?’ (Burke, 1969, p. xv).

Burke focused on the analysis of literary texts that he used as a point of departure to comment on ‘the work itself, society and the nature of language and communication’ (Brock, 1999, p. 2). By focusing on literature and drama, Burke gained insight into methods and principles for analysing human symbolic action. It was his commentary on literary texts that made
him understand the nature of human symbol use and he used literary texts in an ‘examination of the world and its problems’ (Brock, 1999, p. 2). According to Burke (1973), art forms like tragedy or comedy or satire can be described as ‘equipments for living’ that size up situations in various ways and refer to corresponding attitudes. This metaphor of literature as equipment for living resonates with the later description of narratives as ‘cultural tools’ (MacIntyre, 1984; Bruner, 1990; Wertsch, 1998).

Other researchers have also stressed the relation between drama and social life (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1974). Turner argues that ‘social drama provides the “raw material” for aesthetic performances . . . (and) calls this a “constant cross looping” between the social drama and aesthetic performance genres’ (Bell, 2008, p. 111). This interplay has been described by Schechner as follows: ‘. . . the conflicts and characters in social dramas fund the content of aesthetic performances, and aesthetic performances, in turn, color and inflect the unfolding of the social drama’ (Schechner, 2002, cited in Bell, 2008, p. 111). Starting from this idea of cross-looping between ‘social’ and ‘aesthetic’ drama, our claim is that it is possible to use aesthetic drama (theatre, film, novels) in social work education for reflection on the constructive nature of social reality.

In what follows, concepts of Burke are used to study drama (theatre and film) with social work students to reflect upon ‘the work itself, society and the nature of language and communication’ (Brock, 1999, p. 2). This article elaborates on the expansive work that has been done on the use of fictional narratives in teaching and learning (e.g. Coles, 1989; Boyatzis, 1992; Phillips, 1995; Crocco, 2005; Zerby, 2005; Mottart et al., in press). By analysing the use of fictional narratives as cultural tools in social work education, the current article joins in with a small but growing body of work ‘which suggests that social work practice can be enriched by a knowledge of imaginative literature, particularly fiction’ (Hardy, 2005, pp. 207–8). The focus is not merely restricted to literature (Turner, 1991; Hardy, 2005), but also to other forms of narrative and drama.

Case study

The curriculum of the Master of Social Work and Social Welfare Studies at Ghent University (Flanders) contains a course on Cultural Studies that is embedded in the general aims of the programme: giving students the competencies to critically reflect on the relation between social problems and social problem definitions and to stimulate a critical and ethical professional attitude, inspired by social imagination. The course focuses on (amongst other things) the politics of identity in representation using concepts from rhetoric, semiotics and discourse analysis and on the analysis of representations (e.g. violence, social issues) in different media. Participants in this course are Bachelors of Educational Sciences (main subject social
work and social welfare studies) and Professional Bachelors of Social Work who are pursuing an academic Master’s degree in Social Work and Welfare Studies.

In this course, the potential of a rhetorical analysis of fictional narratives was explored. The seventy-five students taking the course watched a play (Welcome in my Backyard) and a film version of the play (Maybe Sweden) by the Dutch–Flemish theatre collective, Wunderbaum. The work of Wunderbaum was selected out of the choice of cultural events taking place at the time (academic year 2006–07). The selection of these narratives was embedded in a larger exercise in which students were asked to attend at least three cultural events (e.g. a play, a film, an exhibition) and to discuss what they could learn from these cultural events for their training as social workers. The dramatistic pentad was used to analyse the play and film together with the students, who had to write down their comments in the online learning environment of the course. First, the students were asked to interpret and evaluate a particular scene: What are the themes that are dealt with? What can be said about the characters (agents)? What binary oppositions are represented in the scene? Second, the students were asked to relate the scene to their own personal and professional experiences. Finally, the students were asked to analyse these narratives from different ratios.

Burke’s dramatistic pentad is a useful tool to study ‘both the outer act of communication between artist and audience and the inner action of the work as it reflects authorial intention and as it captures the imagination of an audience’ (Kimberling, 1982, p. 13). An important concept in Burke’s dramatistic model is that of circumference (Burke, 1969). This means that the frame of the pentadic analysis can be changed (it can be enlarged or reduced). An act can be studied on a micro-level, but can also be framed from a broader perspective (Townsend, 2006). Circumference can be described as ‘the scope of the analytic enterprise, the range of interest, the breadth of the study to be undertaken’ (Feehan, 1979, cited in Kimberling, 1982, p. 17).

A selection of the students’ comments on the narratives is presented by focusing on different circumferences. First, the play and the film are analysed. Then, the scope of analysis is extended to Wunderbaum as a theatre collective. After that, attention is directed to the use of narratives as cultural tools in education, starting from Wertsch’s notion of ‘mediated action’. For Wertsch, socio-cultural analysis should focus on mediated action, which ‘in the pentadic terms outlined by Burke, . . . involves focusing on agents and their cultural tools, the mediators of action’ (Wertsch, 1998, p. 24), the latter referring to the concept of agency. In other words, the use of narratives as cultural tools (as a form of mediated action) is analysed from a pentadic perspective by focusing on attitude, the concept that was added later by Burke, making the pentad a hexad.
Wunderbaum

Wunderbaum is a Dutch–Flemish theatre collective that consists of five actors. They try to make plays accessible for a large audience but, at the same time, question theatre conventions, such as by means of staging their plays outside of the traditional theatre house. They do not work with a single director, but start off from a collective stage direction. Their plays often focus on social issues and ‘commitment’ is a central theme of their work. This research focuses on the play, Welcome in my Backyard, and Maybe Sweden, a film based on this play.

Welcome in my Backyard is a play created in collaboration with amateur actors of foreign origin. Four Western roommates allow a group of asylum seekers to seek refuge in their garden. But, very soon, the refugees are standing in the kitchen to claim the food of the roommates. The young Westerners all react differently to this situation. Maybe Sweden is about five young Westerners who are on a holiday in a vacation house, somewhere in the south of Europe. They spend their time reading books, having discussions on literature and drinking cocktails at the pool until, all of the sudden, they are confronted with refugees from Ghana, travelling to the north, who are looking for shelter in the holiday house. They all react in a different way to the confrontation with the strangers.

The play and the film have similar content: both focus on the ambivalent attitude of Western people towards strangers and refugees. Central themes are social commitment in general and attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in particular. Another central element of the narratives is the (re)presentation of higher culture, specifically the reading of the literary canon. This is an important theme for our research because we focus on the possible functions of literature, drama and film. In the analysis, the focus is on the film, Maybe Sweden, but some of the themes will also be related to the play, Welcome in my Backyard.

Pentadic analysis

Bruner points out that it is ‘trouble’ that drives a drama, ‘and it is generated by a mismatch between two or more of the five constituents of Burke’s pentad’ (Bruner, 2004, p. 697). Therefore, the analysis starts by focusing on the central binary oppositions in the narratives.

Rich versus Poor
Travelling as a luxury versus Travelling as a necessity
Western youth versus Asylum seekers
Western culture versus Ghanaian culture
Garden/home versus Street/world
Social worker versus The needy

Within the group of the young Westerners, two more central binary oppositions emerge:

Idealists versus Cynics
Reading (literature) versus Living (social commitment)

The representation in *Maybe Sweden* focuses on young Westerners with clear economic capital (they can go abroad on a holiday) and symbolic capital (the books that are discussed are part of the literary canon). The young Westerners rely on lifestyles to give meaning to their lives. But, due to the confrontation with the refugees, all this is questioned.

The scene in *Maybe Sweden* where the act is taking place is the garden of a holiday house in the south of Europe. The central act is the reading of books. Initially, the agents are five young people coming from the north of Europe. Later on in the film, new agents arrive to the scene: Ghanaian refugees on their way to the West. For the young Westerners, their initial purpose is relaxing and finding time to read. For the refugees, the purpose is finding a refuge. By combining aspects of this pentad (ratios), the motives of the different characters can be ‘teased out’. When focusing on scene and purpose, we see a different purpose of this scene for the agents. For the young Westerners, it is a place to relax and come to rest; for the refugees, it is a place for surviving.

**Agency–purpose ratio**

A lot revolves around books as agency, and the purpose of this agency. For the Westerners, books are used to relax, to discuss, to give a broad perspective on life. They suggest that books can help the refugees to learn about the West. At a particular moment in *Maybe Sweden*, the function of literature is discussed. Which novel can they give to the refugees to understand Europe?

*Mira:* Shall we talk in English? [Refers to Brooklyn—the refugee—who does not understand Dutch]

*Anna:* (hesitates)...yes. [to Brooklyn] I was saying that Houellebecq is really on to what the Western society is all about.

*Renée:* [to Brooklyn] He is a French writer.

*Werner:* [to Brooklyn] Do you know Michel Houellebecq?

*Anna:* He puts the finger on the right spot.

*Renée:* But Anna, do you think this is useful? I mean... [to Brooklyn] Do you want to know this?
Frederik: I think he does. Maybe it is a good question for Brooklyn. [...] Because Brooklyn is on his way to Europe, do you want him to read Houellebecq?

Anna: If he wants to know where he is going to he has to read Houellebecq, and he will take the first boat back (Maybe Sweden).

A student reacts to this conversation:

There is an attempt to involve the refugee in the conversation. They switch to English but this does not make it any easier for the refugee to participate in the debate. The refugee does not know the writer who tries to capture ‘the essence of Western society’ in his books and as a matter of fact literature is not a major concern for the refugee right now. He has other concerns such as the fulfilling of his basic needs: eating, drinking, clothing, a roof above his head, safety.....

Students focused on this scene in which the conversation that started out in Dutch is switched to English to make sure the refugee can be involved in the discussion. Once translated to English, the characters realise the abstract level of their conversation. One of them asks: ‘Do you want to know this?’ Indeed, the question about the function of literature in general and the French writer Houellebecq in particular is problematised in this conversation.

Act–purpose ratio

In the play and the film, there is a confrontation between a group of rich Western young people and some poor refugees who have different symbolic capital and no economic capital. The latters’ lives revolve around problems of basic needs and survival. They are also travelling but out of necessity and without the luxury of the Westerners. In Maybe Sweden, the two main refugee characters are a son and his sick mother. Western society is represented by the inhabitants of the holiday house. The reaction of one character, Mira, who resolutely commits herself to offer help, is striking. When we look at Mira as an agent, we see that her act of helping the refugees has different purposes. She wants to offer relief, but her purpose is also to find a new goal in life. The refugee woman who is an agent becomes agency for the purpose of Mira. There are different reactions within the group (with gradations): from cynicism to unselfish and altruistic help.

A student noted:

Each character responds in a different way to the arrival of the refugees. This is also interesting. For me each character represents another attitude of the West to refugees. One character remains completely indifferent, as long as the self-interest isn’t damaged, another character is intolerant and even a bit scared of the unknown culture, yet another is tolerant, looking for contact and listening to their narrative, finally one of them takes up the—exaggerated—caring role.

The reactions of the different characters form the basis for reflection upon the content of personal as well as professional aid/relief. Students discussed
fragments from the play and the film in which some striking aspects of this
discussion are represented. Some of the characters from the play, Welcome
in my Backyard, want to help by talking to the refugees, and doing things
together with them. Another character reacts: ‘I think it is strange that
you think you can help someone who says that his father has been executed
and his mother is in jail, just by listening to their story’ (Wunderbaum, 2006,
p. 60). A student interprets this in the following manner:

He is the xenophobic of the gang. He has nothing to offer to the asylum
seekers and does not want to have anything to do with them.

In the next dialogue taken from Welcome in my Backyard, the students read
a critique on social work as a form of self-interest:

Marleen: You don’t want to help at all.
Walter: You aren’t helping either. You are more taken up by it than you are
helping.
Marleen: I am trying to put myself in their situation.
Walter: That’s no help.
Marleen: Why is talking no help?
Matijs: Of course, you help by talking to them.
Marleen: I think talking is helping.
Walter: You talk with them, just because you like talking yourself (Welcome
in my Backyard, Wunderbaum, 2006, p. 60).

In this scene, the idea of ‘doing good’ is approached from many perspectives
and critically evaluated. Students choose fragments in which specific
aspects of social work can be observed. It is within the context of the nar-
rative that these aspects become very tangible. As mentioned above,
there is a binary opposition between the cynical reaction and the humani-
tarian reaction. Specifically, the character Mira in Maybe Sweden caused
a debate about the different purposes for helping others. In this sense,
the development of this character within the plot is very interesting.
A student described this development as follows:

Because Mira can take on her caring role, she feels useful and she totally
flourishes. She needs this caring for the refugees to feel comfortable.
When the refugees leave one night she makes an enormous fuss because
she loses her new commitment and maybe her new goal in life.

Scene–act ratio

When approaching the work of Wunderbaum from a larger circumference,
the scope of analysis changes to what their plays mean for theatre as a
genre. The scene of the traditional theatre house is replaced by different
scenes (plays are staged in an old factory building, or are conceived as a
feature film). Their act (performing a narrative) can be linked to different
purposes: problematising the refugee question, but also playing with traditional theatre conventions. How did the students react to the formal aspects? One student, for instance, thinks the play, *Welcome in my Backyard*, is chaotic. Another student responds to this criticism:

I do not agree that the play was too chaotic. I think this chaos is fun to look at. There are clear lines in the play so it never becomes unclear or not understandable. At the same time I think that the chances are small that someone is bored by the continuous movement on stage.

The reflections of students who had no or little experience with theatre are notable. In addition to the specific insights on the above-mentioned themes, a lot of the students responded very positively about their experiences with the work of Wunderbaum. Also, the experimental approach is seen as positive:

Personally I would not choose a play like this. Thanks to the introduction in our course on the Wunderbaum collective my interest grew to go and watch the work by these people.

**Attitude**

As mentioned above, Burke added *attitude* as a sixth term to the pentad. It searches for the agent’s attitude towards the act. Kimberling rightly states that Burke treats ‘art as a social artifact emerging from a set of attitudes towards the larger social Scene, attitudes which may be explicitly understood or exploited by the artist or implicitly present in the work…. The author can use the audience’s social knowledge to achieve certain dramatic effects’ (Kimberling, 1982, pp. 52–3, our emphasis). The dramatistic pentad also helps to understand an audience’s *attitude* towards a work of art. The circumference of the discussion can be expanded to ‘allow for the Act of creation to stand along the Act of response’ (Kimberling, 1982, p. 39). A focus on the use of these narratives as cultural tools (agency) in education can start from the question, what is the students’ ‘act of response’ towards the ‘act of creation’ by Wunderbaum? Or, what are the students’ attitudes towards the acts of the different characters and the themes in the film/play? The *attitude* towards a possible meaning of social work and a possible function of literature is problematised within both the play and the film.

An important attitude is empathy with what is happening, but at the same time there is also critical reflection on stereotypical representations:

I was really sympathizing with the different characters and could imagine myself in their situation. Wunderbaum really manages to work out different types and different characters you can relate to. This way they make the audience think. How would I respond to this situation? Who is right or wrong? They manage to ask questions without pretending to know the truth themselves.
Empathy with the characters caused one of the students to link themes from the narrative with their own experiences and general insights:

I can say that the *Wunderbaum* collective creates a recognizable picture of how society deals with other cultures. By presenting these different ways of dealing with strangers they try to put things into perspective, they try to call for tolerance, to be understanding of other people’s attitudes towards strangers.

Another student also related it to a personal experience:

I also want to tell something about how this film makes me think about a situation in my own family. Some years ago my uncle presented his Congolese girlfriend to the family. My grandmother responded with a mix of feelings that were also represented in the film: estrangement, taking distance, acceptance, caring . . .

Also, the *attitude* towards the function of art and literature is problematic. The person who is reading literature all the time in *Welcome in my Backyard* seems to have no empathy for the refugees and his reactions are even hostile:

He is the one who resists to the relief of the asylum seekers. In this sense I interpret the reading of a book as if cultural literacy could make us civilized. The asylum seekers first have to acquire some form of literacy before they are allowed into the world of the character. He is a lover of high culture, but only of his own culture . . .

These narratives create the opportunity to discuss this abstract problem. The discussion is about more than the confrontation between literature and commitment, but the exact interpretation of a possible commitment is questioned.

**Discussion**

A lot of research has been undertaken on the different competencies that social workers need and how these competencies can be developed and assessed in different educational programmes. The current article started from the narrative turn in social work to argue that ‘notions of ambiguity, indeterminacy and uncertainty are at the core of social work and should be built upon and not defined out’ (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 44), which implies for social work education that ‘uncertainty is the domain of the educated professional’ (Howe, 1995, cited in Parton and O’Byrne, 2000, p. 44). This was related to Burke’s dramatism—a ‘perspective about perspectives’ that focuses on the intentionality of human actions and the ways in which human beings make moral choices driven by motives, intentions and purposes. Burke uses the concept of ‘drama’ to understand human activity ‘as involved in conflict, in purpose, in change’ (Gusfield, 1989, p. 9) and it is this ‘dramatic quality of life that is represented in literature’
(Gusfield, 1989, p. 37). The focus was restricted not only to literature, but also to other forms of narrative and drama.

By using the dramatistic pentad to analyse this play and film, students were able to reflect upon different issues related to social work. Specifically, they focused on social commitment and how to deal with refugees and asylum seekers. Based on the pentadic analysis of the narratives, the goal of commitment in social work was questioned from an act–purpose ratio. The idea of ‘doing good’ was approached from many perspectives and critically evaluated. Students also focused on the confrontation between ‘commitment’ and ‘art’, by focusing on the representation of the functions of literature and literary culture (agency–purpose). So, the central claim of this research on the use of narratives as cultural tools was thematised and problematised in the narrative itself. By analysing the narrative from different circumferences, the focus could be shifted to the formal aspects of the play and the film and the role of Wunderbaum as a theatre collective (scene–act) could be commented upon. From yet another circumference, attention could be directed to the use of narratives as cultural tools (agency) by focusing on the attitude of our students towards the play and the film.

This last perspective can raise questions about assessing the use of narratives in social work education. As in Wertsch’s study on the use of narratives as cultural tools in understanding history, readers could ask ‘why not just talk about how well students have learned information?’ (Wertsch, 1998, p. 98). Wertsch states that, to some degree, answers to this question can be found in ‘accounts of how these cultural tools are produced’ and used, but ‘the major response concerns the dynamic tension that exists between cultural tools and agents’ consumption of them ... This notion of tension between agent and cultural tool is one that stands at the center of accounts of mediated action, but it is unlikely to arise in standard analyses that focus on cognitive process’ (Wertsch, 1998, p. 98). For the purpose of this research, the focus was on an evaluation of the ‘engagement’ of students with fictional narratives.

By analysing this play and film from a dramatistic perspective, students had the opportunity not only to study (fictional) narratives, but also to reflect upon their own (professional and personal) experiences. This perspective can be related to Taylor’s call that ‘social work practitioners, educators and academics need to employ a reflexive approach to their knowledge in order to achieve a critical awareness of their own processes and products’ (Taylor, 2006, p. 192), and their own (professional or academic) position as well. This article explored the potential of a rhetorical analysis of narratives for achieving this kind of reflexive approach and critical awareness.

Reflexivity is often related to Paolo Freire’s concept of praxis, which is ‘the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it’ (Freire, 1998, cited in Enoch, 2004, p. 289). By advocating the study of persuasive resources, ‘Burke adds a rhetorical nuance to
praxis as he details the ways students can adopt an attitude of reflective patience by methodically investigating the ways language functions’ (Enoch, 2004, p. 290) and how symbolic action occurs. This opens up perspectives for social work educators, because educators can ‘gain a rhetorical sense of what it means for . . . students to “struggle through interpretations” and to “reflect upon the world”’ (Enoch, 2004, p. 290). Moreover, this rhetorical perspective problematises the straightforward notion that ‘reflection must lead to action and/or action must be reflected upon’ (Enoch, 2004, p. 291). It makes clear that ‘reflection is action in and of itself. Linguistic reflection, Burke points out, is the institutionalizing of an attitude; it habituates students into responding to literature and life with careful and critical thought’ (Enoch, 2004, p. 291).

Therefore, it is useful to elaborate on Parton’s (2000) reference to the work of Burke to understand the close relationship between action and contemplation. Further research can explore the possible use of key concepts of Burke’s work in social work education, by asking students to use the pentad to analyse narratives of clients, or conversations between clients and social workers. By applying the pentad, students can focus on how different ratios construct the framing of an issue and how this can affect perception and action in social worker – client relationships and pathways of clients.

Conclusion

This article aims to be a contribution to the research on social work education by discussing what kind of attitude can be expected from social workers as critical professionals. It is suggested that some background in rhetoric in order to understand and interpret narratives can be beneficial for reflective practitioners. Of course, such a rhetorical perspective cannot work as a panacea for solving all practical problems. The argument is not that this focus on narratives and rhetoric should replace all other perspectives and approaches in social work education. The claim is, however, that rhetoric in general and the dramatistic pentad in particular provide a methodology to analyse, to interpret and to evaluate practical situations. Finally, it is argued that a rhetorical perspective can create a critical and even liberating awareness.

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