

# "Everything is Research". A brief reflection on how wizards and Barbie dolls are developing my understanding of binaries in my different contexts.

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## Abstract

This writing reflects on how binaries and labels can present themselves for exploration and irreverence in all contexts, from systemic practice in a multidisciplinary team to enjoying theatre, TV and music with family. When we see "everything is research" as practitioner-researchers, we can use any opportunity to consider our positions, both privately and in dialogue with others, and challenge ourselves to work towards ethical congruence in our many contexts.

Ideas about binaries, labels and the power of storytelling are reaching me and my children in unexpected places.

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From a theatre in Bristol, a scratched CD in the car, and recently from a cinema screen, the Wizard from Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked* has sung these words to us

*"Elphaba, where I'm from  
We believe all sorts of things that aren't true  
We call it "history"*

*A man's called a traitor or liberator  
A rich man's a thief or philanthropist  
Is one a crusader or ruthless invader?  
It's all in which label is able to persist*

*There are precious few at ease with moral ambiguities  
So we act as though they don't exist"*

(Schwartz, 2003)

PAUSE THE MUSIC

*"Okay, what does everyone think about what they've just heard?"  
(Groans come from the back seat)*

After a(nother) discussion, the music continues in the car and in my head.

Starting on the journey of a systemic doctorate, my peers and I were encouraged to see everything as research; that we were never *not* researching. I heard this guidance with a little scepticism and was

more than a little of wary about it – it felt like too perfect a get-out clause for weeks where there was less reading and writing, and I was worried about taking advantage of it.

But sitting in the theatre, car and cinema, listening to this music with my family, I have come back to that idea. When you're completing a social constructionist doctorate, and people are *singing* at you about labels and making you gasp and look around and reflect on your relationship to these ideas, it feels possible to agree: *this is research!* They were right, and I should never have been so arrogant as to have doubted them! So, how can I use these melodic prompts to examine my connection to the binary descriptions that bounce between polarities, in my daily life?

In my community of practice, I'm encouraged to think about binaries, notice them in my practice, challenge their insidious nature. As a systemic psychotherapist working in the NHS, their presence is more than familiar. Only this week a psychiatrist remarked on the 'yes/no' direction his training gives him, when deciding whether a person is experiencing a mental disorder, despite himself seeing us all on a spectrum where these 'symptoms' may be evident in specific contexts, such as distress or lack of sleep. Working alongside my colleagues in a psychiatry-led service, a hospital setting, steeped as we are in the medical model and finding our way to relate to each other's ontological and epistemological and ethical understandings and beliefs, where do we shift and move and absorb each other's language, and perpetuate the power of this language?

To continue the above song, with my own musings alongside it...

<i>"Wonderful</i>	Binaries
<i>They called me "Wonderful"</i>	We like our binaries
<i>So, I said "Wonderful, if you insist"</i>	So, I said "binaries, if you insist"
<i>I will be "Wonderful"</i>	I will use binaries!
<i>And they said "Wonderful"</i>	We'll all feel more at ease
<i>Believe me, it's hard to resist"</i>	Believe me, they're hard to resist
(Schwartz, 2003)	(My workplace translation)

I wonder about whether my tolerance for binaries increases as I spend more time in these settings. What are the labels, which I have heard so often in my NHS-based roles, which I have become familiar with? The 'boiling frog' analogy comes to mind – how might I slowly be warmed to the use of binaries around me, so that in the end I don't even notice them? How does this affect my practice? Where have I moved from challenging them to accepting their use, to using them in contexts where it supports communication between multidisciplinary team members? Where is there a risk that they may find, or have found, their way into my own language practices? Where does this language have a reflexive influence over my own ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007).

I continue with my reimagining of *Wicked* lyrics (which I acknowledge to be lacking in rhyme, as well as making more sense if you've heard the song):

<i>"Elphaba, where I'm from</i>	Reader, where I'm from
<i>We believe all sorts of things that aren't</i>	We use all sorts of terms that aren't
<i>true</i>	true
<i>We call it "history"</i>	We call it "labelling"

*A man's called a traitor or liberator  
A rich man's a thief or philanthropist  
Is one a crusader or ruthless invader?*

*It's all in which label is able to persist"*  
(Schwartz, 2003)

A girl's called anorexic or disciplined  
A mother's cold or smothering, enmeshed  
Is one a recovery inspirer, or pro-ANA  
influencer?

It's all in which label is able to persist  
(My workplace translation)

Many of us have experienced the unease and pain that can come from a label being attached to us against our will. In the worlds of diagnosis and treatment, these labels carry significant power. Who decides and what does it mean, for whom, about whom? How do we think about the ethics of power in these labels and the stories they invite?

I need to examine and reexamine my relationship to these labels, and how my lack of challenge or use of them in my practice contexts perpetuates them. But if I were to think this would only take place in supervision, or whilst writing private reflections, I was of course misguided. TV and theatre trips are research too, giving me the opportunity to reflect upon the responsibilities we have as professionals and storytellers with power:

*"Citizens of Oz! There is an enemy who must be found and captured. Believe nothing she says... She is evil... Her green skin is but an outward manifestorium of her twisted nature. This distortion! This repulsion! This wicked witch!"*

Madame Morrible, turning against Elphaba – and aided by a powerful position and a loudspeaker – in Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked* (2003).

*"Alma was added to the child protection register under the category 'gravely at risk'... Alma is not making progress academically... Alma is an overactive, over sensitive, emotionally distressed child... the level of neglect Alma has suffered is already presenting itself in Alma's chaotic attachment style and low self-esteem this could cause more problems for Alma later in life".*

*"That's like some sort of shit Mystic Meg isn't it?"*

Alma reading her Social Services and Psychiatric case notes in *Alma's Not Normal* (2021), inspired by writer Sophie Willan's lived experience of care services and her engagement with services.

*"Let me tell you what I wish I'd known  
When I was young and dreamed of glory  
You have no control  
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?"*

The reflections of multiple characters on the influence of the storyteller in how your legacy is decided, in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015).

Each of these characters reminded me to notice the dominant story-telling abilities of those in power, prompting further reflections on my positions and ethical practices.

And who could complete a piece of writing about systemic practice without mentioning Barbie? I use her now, to help us think about the implication of individual pathology implied by the attribution of labels. In my practice context, a young person (most often identifying as female) might receive a diagnosis of an eating disorder because they are malnourished and dangerously starving. The diagnosis can be seen as a ticket to lifesaving treatment, but the process can ignore society's contribution to this situation. When does a girl have a pathologically disordered mind, and when is she just doing what she's invited to do to succeed in her contexts? What she's seen her mum do. What her aunt and nan talk about, from that time they went to the weight-loss club. What the tabloids and celebrity magazines publish, splashing titbits of extreme diets across their front pages in aghast tones, knowing all the while that people are buying them to follow the detail. The yes/no answer to 'does she meet the criteria for anorexia nervosa in the ICD-11?' misses this.

Some of these dilemmas – the social construction of health and thinness, the unwritten social rules for women talking about thinness in the Western world, the invitation to incongruity – are attended to in the feature film *Barbie*, co-written by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach:

*"You have to be thin, but not too thin.*

*And you can never say you want to be thin.*

*You have to say you want to be healthy, but you also have to be thin."*

*(Barbie, 2023)*

So, it appears that my family's leisure and cultural experiences in the past year or two have been a rich source of encouragement to notice binaries, labels and social constructions around me. Perhaps each reader will have their own sources to draw upon. My noticings have helped me to talk with my family about these important issues, and to think together about the binaries we find unhelpful and can resist in our lives. I'm grateful for them leaping out at me from stages, screens and stereotypes. These aren't finished thoughts; there is no tidy ending to my reflections. I will continue to navigate my work context, placing myself and being placed on the inside, on the outside and on the permeable borders of the systems I engage with. But I will also take the opportunities I have to reflect on the ubiquity of binaries in my various contexts, to challenge and resist their use. This issue of *Murmurations* and its invitation to go 'Beyond Binaries', the associated workshops in Manchester, and my discussions with my community of practice aid me in my ongoing process. As, it seems, does a good sing-a-long in the car. After all, going beyond binary ideas of what does and doesn't count as research has been an invitation to me all along.

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### About the author

**Kate Meredith** is (to follow)

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