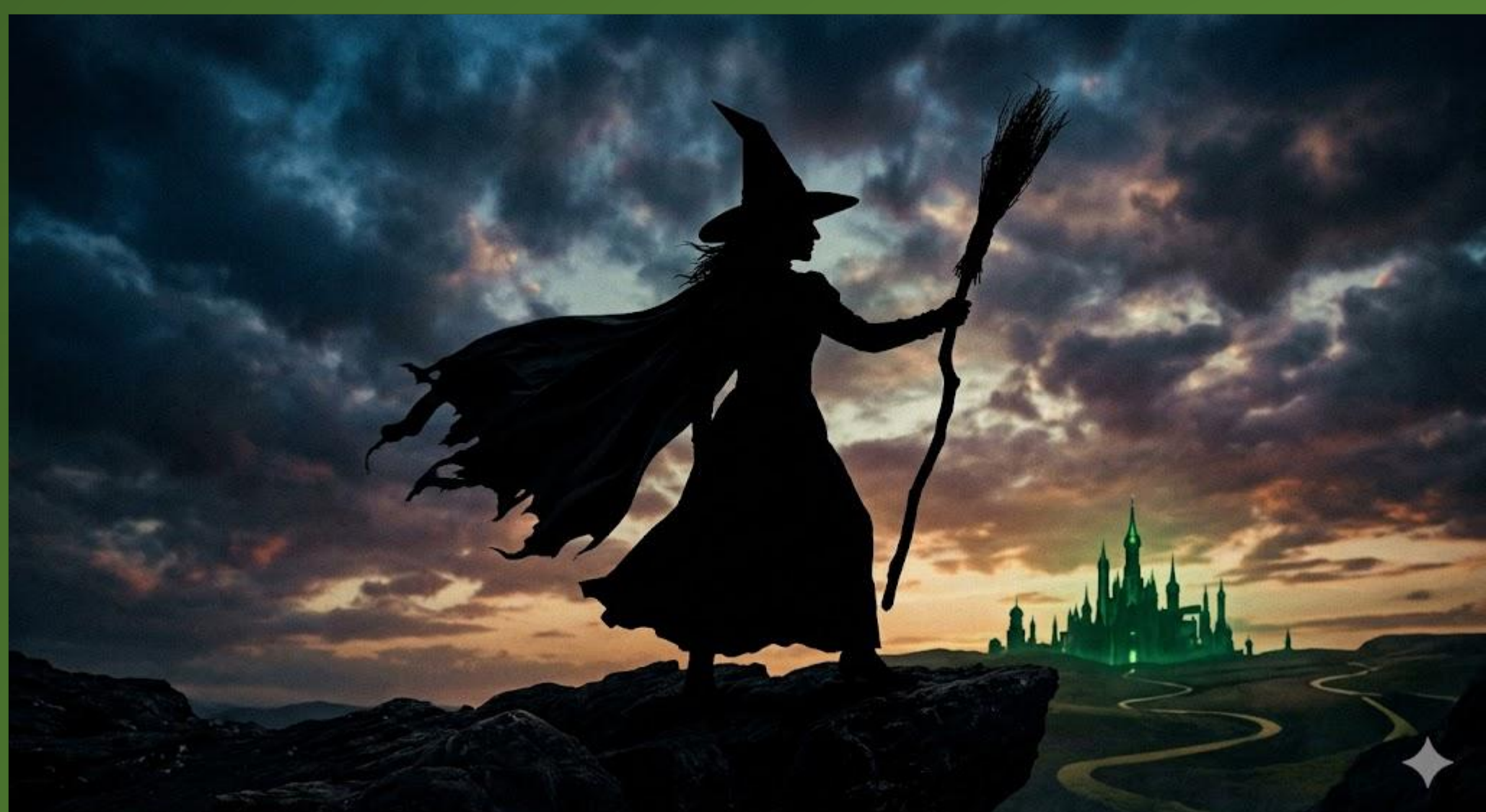


DECONSTRUCTING WICKED NARRATIVES:

THE (YELLOW BRICK) ROAD TO RECLAIMING IDENTITIES

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Accepting of limits

This poster provides a summary of key points from our 2025 published paper (Haslam, *et al.* 2025) which used the musical and film, *Wicked*, as an allegory.

In *Wicked*, we learn that 'wickedness' is not an inherent trait for the Wicked Witch of the West (her real name, Elphaba) but is essentially a label 'thrust upon her' by an intolerant society and an oppressive leader.

While acknowledging *Wicked's* central themes of marginalised identities, particularly at those intersections of gender, race and sexual orientation, we also highlight how the social construction of 'wickedness' in *Wicked* similarly mirrors those processes of psychiatrisation, and their harmful effects.

The rules of someone else's game?

The Wizard of Oz maintains his power by identifying marginalised groups who serve as focal points for societal fears. This process of 'othering' constructs difference as threatening and distracts from true sources of systemic oppression. In *Wicked*, identities are weaponised. And it is the Wizard who controls this narrative.

We argue that this also reflects dominant psychiatric discourse, 'wickedness' being attributed to Elphaba in the same manner that illness or deviance is often located within psychiatrised individuals. That is, without much care to, or understanding of, the trauma and those systemic factors that may also contribute.

In particular, we argue that some diagnoses (such as 'personality disorder') might even be viewed as wicked labels; used to define the boundaries of normality and to maintain social order. These can prioritise the needs of systems over meeting those of individuals - justifying exclusionary practices or paternalistic control, for example.



Working in tandem?

Meanwhile, we also argue that healthcare professionals, nurses in particular, can often collude with oppressive systems, performing the 'dirty work' of psychiatry under a rhetoric of benevolence. This can lead to workforce alienation and moral injury as nurses are forced to betray their core values as caregivers and enforce institutional power as agents of social control.

Wicked's Glinda, we suggest, represents failed allyship; the 'good' witch ultimately choosing societal approval and aligning with dominant power structures. The *Wizard of Oz's* Dorothy, meanwhile, symbolises true solidarity, having the capacity both to see beyond labels to understand motivations, and for a shared humanity.

Therefore, we suggest that under different circumstances, maybe Dorothy and Elphaba could have been allies.

Taking the leap and defying gravity

Elphaba's story highlights the need for understanding and the importance of listening to marginalised voices. The need to reclaim individual and group narratives especially in mental health care, requires a shift from medicalised pathology towards those contextual, meaning-focused approaches that empower individuals to both reclaim and re-author their own stories.

Dialogic approaches and radical empathy should be prioritised over paternalistic control and the urge to resolve or fix.

We propose that healthcare professionals, such as nurses, should align with service-user and survivor movements to collectively resist harmful orthodoxies and together, challenge systemic injustice.



Full paper reference: Haslam, M. Wright, K. Lamph, G. & McKeown, M. (2025). Wicked Labels, and the Power of Narrative in Mental Health Nursing. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*. 32. pp.1423-1429

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