

Reflection in and critical reflection on social work: Learning about learning and thinking about thinking in social work

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Abstract

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is on the threshold of a new, conscious journey of reflection and analysis as it embarks on the path of becoming a registered profession. As such it is timely to examine some key concepts that emerge in the current social work literature. Three recently published books have provided a rich source of analysis and ideas.

This review article discusses the three linked notions of 'reflection', 'critical reflection' and 'the learning organisation' with reference to recent discussion on the discipline of social work and on the fields of professional learning, thinking and continuing education. In particular, themes relevant to social work education and professional development are considered. As a review article it inevitably examines the contribution of these books and their complex fields with a wide angled lens, but it may provide readers with a starting point for further exploration.

Introduction

Three recent books all published by Ashgate within a few months of each other in 2004 have traversed some interesting ground in social work and are of particular interest to those researching and thinking about reflection and critical reflection in both the profession and the academic discipline.

- Redmond, B. (2004). *Reflection in action: developing reflective practice in health and social services*. Ashgate: Aldershot.
- Gould, N. and Baldwin, M. (Eds). (2004). *Social work, critical reflection and the learning organisation*. Ashgate: Aldershot.
- Lovelock, R., Powell, J. and Lyons, K. (Eds). (2004). *Reflecting on social work-discipline and profession*. Ashgate: Aldershot.

My own interest in this field stems from two intersecting fields: learning in and for supervision practice and the professional construction of learning and development practices

in social work. In both fields there has been a strong vein of support for the notion of reflective practice (Gould and Taylor, 1996; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995; Morrison, 1997) as a cornerstone for effective supervision and professional development in social work. In recent years there has been a strong emphasis on the concept of continuous professional learning as a central, desirable construct within the organisational sphere in social work and social services.

The attractiveness of organisational learning approaches to social work is perhaps explained by two rather contradictory but linked trends, firstly of managerialism in social services and secondly in the disciplines of reflection and critical reflection which inform practice in many of the helping professions. Training for management in the managerialist milieus of the 1980s and 90s has exposed social service managers to the field of organisational learning. In previous decades social workers' ongoing learning would have been located in the personal sphere – perhaps supported by the employer through assistance with fees and time off, but not planned in the contemporary way that links individual learning to organisational goals.

Continuous reflection is a central component of organisational learning approaches popularised by Senge (Senge, 1990). The process of reflection within professional practice can be seen as the ability and opportunity to 'micro-critique' practices and processes within the day-to-day activities of the profession or 'macro-critique' the practice itself. This macro-critique requires the practitioner to be able to stand back and look critically at her/his own profession and be aware and responsive to issues of discrimination, oppression and social justice within the field of practice. From a broad perspective, social workers, by virtue of their espousing strong commitment to social justice, relish the opportunity to critique systems, including state legislated social work activity.

These three new books published by Ashgate provide a rich source of case studies of reflective processes, elucidation of key theoretical positions and critique and challenge to the many assumptions educators, practitioners and managers may have about their critical reflection practices.

Reflective practice

Baibre Redmond's *Reflection in Action: developing reflective practice in health and social services* is a description of a research process involving the design, implementation and evaluation of the author's model of reflective teaching and learning (Redmond, 2004). Her research participants are a multidisciplinary group of professionals working with parents of children and young people with an intellectual disability. The aim of the model is to explore their beliefs and practices and develop a less generalised and more multi-dimensional understanding of their clients' world.

Reflective practice is now thoroughly embedded within the social work profession, as it is in other helping professions, particularly nursing. Michael Eraut, in a recent editorial in the

journal Learning in Health and Social Care, comments:

The term 'reflection' is now in such common use that there is a considerable danger of it being taken for granted, rather than treated as problematic. Are we ceasing to be reflective about how we use 'reflection' in our discourse and our practice? How do we practise reflection and does it achieve what we claim it achieves? (Eraut, 2004).

The concept has not gone unchallenged in the social work literature. In his rather stinging attack on the uncritical adoption of 'reflective practice', Ixer acknowledges the proliferation of assessments of reflective practice within social work education (Ixer, 1999). His concern is that to assess students against such a vague conceptual notion is inequitable because it is likely to further oppress vulnerable learners who do not happen to fit into the assessor's 'own ideas of what they believe reflective learning to be' (Ixer 1999: 514).

Redmond comments that Ixer highlights the 'danger of a reflective approach being applied by teachers who are not reflective in themselves. A point which Schon fails to explore in any great detail' (Redmond, 2004). Her approach to this study emphasizes the duality of the researcher-teacher role - examining her own practice as a reflective teacher, while working with her professional students.

Redmond provides students of reflective practice with a significant resource in this text, not least of which is a very detailed and immensely valuable review of the literature. Two chapters review the literature on reflection in professional learning and practice with a focus on tracing the development of the concept of reflective practice from the works of John Dewey (1859-1952) and the later contributions of educationalists Freire, Mezirow (particularly perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981) and Brookfield (critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987). Her own work has been particularly influenced by Donald Schon (Schon, 1991). These chapters systematically explore the development of the reflection concept, and in helpful tables set out the features of these different perspectives and the contribution they have made to the development of reflective practice as a concept. In this section, Redmond provides an excellent resource for students and teachers in the field. *Reflection in action* is a very thorough text, which will be particularly of interest to educators and supervisors, and those interested in participatory action research. Attention is paid to the participation of service users and the consequential enrichment of the experience. The author comments:

The analysis of students' observations recorded shortly after their session with parents revealed significant changes...Instead of the generalized opinions on parents recorded [earlier] students began to adopt a more individualized view...[this work with parents] enabled many to begin the process of critical learning and perspective transformation (Redmond, 2004: 141).

This book is an excellent case study of a programme designed to develop reflective learning practices in a social services setting. This task is not straightforward as Jan Fook's chapter in the next book reviewed indicates (Fook, 2004).

Critical reflections on learning and development

Gould and Baldwin's *Social Work, Critical Reflection and the Learning Organization* is an edited collection which aims to reconnect with the reflective learning debates and 'address the need to locate the learning and expertise of individual practitioners within the wider organizational context' (Gould, 2004).

In the introduction, Gould comments that the learning organisation is not without problems for the social services, acknowledging its origins in addressing commercial concerns within a turbulent economic era (Ibid). Gould suggests though that:

...social work is in position to make significant contributions to the wider understanding of the learning organization through its concerns with the effects of power and the structural disadvantages of marginalized individuals and groups which are signally missing from the generic management literature (Ibid: 2).

This book sets out to make this contribution by bringing together the ideas of some key writers and thinkers. Chapters by Martyn Jones ('Supervision, learning and transformative practices') and Synnove Karvinen-Niinikoski ('Social work supervision contributing to innovative knowledge production and open expertise') bring together and analyse ideas and trends for a professional supervision practice which is grounded in learning theories. The notion of the learning organisation is a theme that draws most of the chapters together and Baldwin, Fook and Taylor all provide excellent discussions of this concept.

The idea of 'the learning organisation', its origins in the work of Argyris and Schon (Argyris and Schon, 1974) and widely disseminated through the work of Peter Senge (Senge, 1990) has become a potent metaphor for the business of learning and development in social service organisations. The learning organisation's influence beyond the business sector is indicated by articles that refer to it in professional contexts such as health, social services and education (Carnochan and Austin, 2001; Gould, 2000; Kurtz, 1998). With a strong echo of the many post-mortems that occur in the public arena following failures in public organisations, the learning organisation focuses on problem solving. Grieves comments, 'organisational learning can be seen as a systematic solution for dealing with operational processes that emerge in the daily round of events that give rise to problems or dysfunction in the workplace' (Grieves, 2000).

Its main features are continuous critical reflection on the business of the organisation, the empowerment of individuals within the work world, an emphasis on communication and on the harnessing of knowledge and energy through commitment to teamwork. In Aotearoa New Zealand the Baseline Review, a major report on the capability and baseline funding of the Department of Child Youth and Family (CYF) states that a raft of initiatives should have an underlying focus on 'supporting CYF to become a *learning organisation*' (Treasury, 2003). This is not further defined or supported by any statements explicitly linking policy proposals to the concept of the learning organisation.

In this current exploration of the learning organisation, Imogen Taylor ('Multi-professional teams and the learning organisation') identifies themes that recur in the learning

organization literature and that are relevant to a critical consideration of its usefulness (Taylor, 2004). Firstly, that the learning organisation is responsive to change. Taylor points out that there is an assumption that organisations are stable but wanting to change (ibid: 79). Mark Baldwin, in his chapter in this current work, identifies four threats to critical reflection in social work contexts: managerialism, the battleground over evidence (what works), rational policy implementation and failures of critical reflection (Baldwin, 2004). It is perhaps the endless push for training in organisations which is linked to rapid policy implementation that makes genuine critical learning so difficult in many organisations in social work. Aotearoa New Zealand readers would no doubt agree that in the current climate public service organisations are anything but stable, but instead subject to constant external tinkering and restructuring.

A second theme is that learning is a way of life rather than an occasional event. Much learning in professional life is known to be informal and unplanned, (M Eraut, 1992; Wenger, 1998). A third theme is that learning is a collective activity involving choices. Recent research findings rather suggest that much current learning and development policy utilises 'technologies of training' linked to neo-liberal management practices (Reich, 2002), for example, learning contracts or professional development plans and strong managerial control over learning opportunities. Much training within social work may be grounded in the 'diagnostic and prescriptive discourse of managerial experts in their quest for the perfectly controlled workplace' (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994). There is little discussion and debate about ongoing professional learning in social work in Aotearoa New Zealand and even less research, perhaps reflecting a current obsession with technical and instrumental learning and standardising of practice. It could be argued that imported concepts such as 'the learning organisation' tend to be adopted uncritically. There may be an assumption that if we prescribe critical reflection as a treatment for what ails us then what we do in response to this is inevitably effective. The reality is that there is little research on the *outcomes* of the prescription for reflective practice.

In the introduction to *Social Work, Critical Reflection and the Learning Organization*, Gould alludes to critical perspectives while recognizing the undoubted contribution and influence of the learning organisation. A review of the literature (Beddoe, Forthcoming) exposes a number of strong themes. Firstly there is a reliance on the organisation as a site for learning and the consequent focus on learning processes occurring within the organisation's current culture. Field refers to the organisation's 'technoculture', which reflects the assumptions and lessons of the past, and argues that this is likely to impede the power shift required and may hinder learning (Field, 1997). This technoculture is likely to be reflected in such things as remuneration and recognition systems, approaches to disputes, the role of supervisors and so forth, and these things 'can perpetuate control oriented ways of operating long after management has made a genuine effort to support empowerment and learning' (ibid).

As such the learning organisation posits a very dominant role for managers and a

subordinate role for workers. Coopey argues that while learning organisations may be less hierarchical than conventional organisations, with fewer managerial levels, the 'incumbents of such position will typically occupy quiet crucial roles at internal and external boundaries' giving them informational power as well as the usual command over people and resources (Coopey, 1996: 357).

Field's research found that workers approached changes in organisational learning approaches with some trepidation because of the underlying need for security and the strength of the current culture and its overt and more subtle hierarchies (Field, 1997). If there cannot be an open acknowledgement of power differentials then the reliance on 'open dialogue' for learning may be shaky. Owenby considers there is a risk of organisational self-deception and that to be successful organisations 'must commit to uncovering hidden power relationships and eliminating surplus control' (Owenby 2002: 59). Many Aotearoa New Zealand social workers will identify with strong feelings of cynicism that may be experienced when management rolls into town to announce 'the next big thing', and managers in turn may identify feelings of frustration at dealing with 'resistance' to change and 'new' directions. Jan Fook's chapter in this book addresses some of the dynamics that can impact on the 'buy in' to new learning opportunities (Fook, 2004). In another case study Amy Rossiter and colleagues explore reflective processes and organisational change within a health setting (Badwall, O'Connor, and Rossiter, 2004).

Learning at work can privilege particular kinds of knowledge. Other kinds of knowledge – cultural, transformative and personal -- may be relegated to the private sphere (Fenwick, 1998). There is a risk of the deconstruction of professional knowledge that comes from critical reflection in practice and its replacement with technologies of learning and practice. In social work this is particularly reflected in the current drive for evidence-based practice. Critical reflection is focused inwards (and focuses on work processes and practices) and not onto the social structures and power relations that may influence practice.

In Gould and Baldwin, Taylor argues that much of the literature tends to focus on learning within organisations rather than how organisations learn and how the linkages or lack of these can contribute to whether there is learning between levels (Taylor, 2004: 80). This is also explored in Jan Fook's chapter, 'Critical reflection and organisational learning and change: a case study', (Fook, 2004). In this chapter, Fook discusses the problem of securing 'buy in' at all the levels of organisations linking the analysis to a case study describing the delivery of a programme aimed to foster critical reflection. As noted earlier, this is an excellent chapter, which may be of particular interest to managers of learning and development in agency settings, as well as those who contract in to organisational training.

This is a superb edited collection and will be of great interest to educators, supervisors, training consultants and managers in social and human services.

Critical reflection on the profession

The last new text to be considered in this review locates its 'reflection' at the macro level – standing back to view the profession of social work (and its academic discipline) from a wider lens. Lovelock, Powell and Lyons' *Reflecting on social work-discipline and profession* is an edited collection of scholarly papers on the discipline of social work. The key theme of this book is the complex web of relationships between social work theory (and knowledge), social work practice and social work research. These elements are considered from a critical perspective grounded in the view that knowledge, practice and research are influenced by and, in a limited way, influence the wider social policy environment. Within this book the focus is on 'thinking about thinking about social work' (Lovelock and Powell, 2004).

This book is a collection of chapters contributed by some of the leading social work writers in the United Kingdom. Its focus is the complex set of relationships between social work practice and public policy (the profession) and theory and research (the discipline) (Payne, back cover). The sum of the various contributions is an analysis of the current state of social work, its constraints and aspirations. While largely focused on the United Kingdom and Europe there will be many points of resonance for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Bill Jordan and Nigel Parton, for example, start their chapter with a discussion of what they see as a paradox – how social work core skills – 'creative, interpersonal, interactive and concerned with negotiating and mediating over issues of interdependence, power and obligation are at a discount' in public sector organisations yet popular in other sectors (Jordan and Parton, 2004).

This perhaps has some parallels in Aotearoa New Zealand where there appears to be considerable movement of qualified people out of social work services in the public sector into other roles such as management, organisational development, consultancy, advocacy and mediation. An article in the *New Zealand Herald* in February quotes a former social worker :

...ironically, Osmond believes the gravitation of many companies towards the 'warm fuzzies' by more closely aligning with their stakeholders is increasingly linking her to her social worker background. What they're doing, she says, is transposing key social worker mantras - like working with groups on issues, exploring issues thoroughly, reaching agreements and looking for options - from a family setting into an organizational sense' (Storey, 2004).

The idea underpinning Jordan and Parton's contribution and other chapters in this book, is that in the present climate, social work organisations may not be entirely utilising the skills their social workers have - some employers of course might see this differently and argue that the social workers haven't got the skills they need! Nevertheless, there is some irony in the fact that social work skills (and values) may find more of a home in management and business settings. And that public sector social workers find themselves being 'functionaries subject to (often seemingly alien) assessment, audit and inspection' (Jordan and Parton, 2004).

In another chapter, 'The McDonaldization of Social Work', Adrian James considers the extent to which social services apply the characteristics of McDonaldization (a term coined by Ritzer 1983, cited in James 2004) which include principles of efficiency, predictability, control, application of technologies to work processes and so forth (James, 2004). The most significant aspect for social workers is perhaps the concern that clients (as customers) are offered a limited choice of products, that is not personalised and in which neither client nor social worker has much independent control or discretion. Contrast this with Redmond's work discussed earlier in this article in which an important outcome of the involvement of parents was that the workers concerned developed a less generalised approach to work with individuals and families, the outcome of this process of learning perhaps being a more customised product in the social work café!

A second significant theme in this collection is that of the currency of 'evidence-based practice' and the current focus on research. Butler and Pugh critically examine the forms and politics of current approaches to research. They note that research has a political dimension in the current climate, being strongly linked to the funding of tertiary education. In the United Kingdom the Research Assessment Exercise, and in New Zealand the Performance Based Research Funding scheme are government-driven strategies to 'steer' the tertiary sector research effort. This can be linked to trends in government policy in the welfare sector. The drive for evidence-based practice is given considerable critical attention in this book. Butler and Pugh, for example, argue that 'we would (suggest) that the scientism implicit in the dominant conception of evidence-based practice that has infiltrated social work suggests that it is both possible and desirable to don a metaphorical white coat in approaching the social' (Butler and Pugh, 2004). Beth Humphries considers research as a moral and public activity and Nick Gould discusses qualitative research in social work. There is much of interest here for students of the debates about research and the privileging of different methodologies.

This is a challenging text, with such a breadth of scope that it is difficult to review without considering every single contribution, as each has much to offer. In essence it is of great interest to all social workers and essential reading for all of those actively engaged in, or considering engagement in, social work research. The final chapter explores the contribution of Habermas and Foucault to the 'thinking about thinking' aspects of social work scholarship and research. This chapter draws together many of the themes (to some extent of all these recent offerings by Ashgate) in a scholarly discussion of the (academic) discipline of social work (Lovell and Powell, 2004).

Conclusions

The importance of reflection, continual learning and critical reflection within social services cannot be denied. There have been many contributions to our knowledge base about learning

in social work, some from organisational development theory, some from adult and continuing education. This review article has attempted to encourage social work practitioners, supervisors and educators to avoid uncritical adoption of practices without being inquisitive about the origins and underpinning concepts.

The author's own view is that what is essential is a conception of reflection that is based on problem solving, and learning from points of challenge that is perhaps better described as reflexive. Reflective practice is not innate; indeed it can be argued that reflection is not possible without the development of strong critical thinking skills in pre-service education. The discipline of 'critical thinking involves the critical appraisal of beliefs, arguments and claims in order to arrive at well-reasoned judgments. *What helps believe influences what they do!* Thus it is important to examine beliefs in relation their accuracy (Authors' italics)' (Gibbs and Gambrill, 1999).

Central to this approach is the willingness to examine practice (and policy) from a somewhat distanced position, not merely to critique in the sense of negative evaluation but to seek to understand and interpret (Lovelock and Powell, 2004). It is very easy for professionals to rely on commonly held practices, often based on generalizations that may not be tested (or re-tested). It is also tempting to reject ideas on superficial reading because of long held but not re-tested assumptions about meaning. The purpose of reflective learning and reflective practice must be firmly lodged in a strong belief in and commitment to transformation of practice to be responsive, creative and grounded in an understanding of the perspective and aspirations of service users. These three books all contribute to our profession and are strongly recommended to students, more particularly post-graduate students, educators, supervisors and researchers.

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â€¢ The art of social work practice refers to the ways in which you use these practice theories within the context of your own professional development and in the unique client situations in which you work. â€¢ Critical reflection and reflexivity are vital integrative processes in your social work practice. Key terms. critical reflection field of practice interpretative lens personal-self practice theory praxis professional-self reflexivity supervision. 3. part 01 Social Work and Contemporary Issues. CRITICAL REFLECTION Introduction Entering the teaching profession could be a complex and taxing process in the framework of my professional development. The part played by reflection practices in this context is very important. These are my critical reflective approaches throughout my teaching and learning. This argument is supported by Bengtsson (1998), who pointed out that there are many views on what constitutes reflection and what reflective practitioners do, and the impact of reflection on the quality of teaching and learning. This argument was supported by Ghaye et al (1998) who argued that many teachers have gained from learning through reflection and that is why they are called reflective practitioners. Critical reflection is often assessed through a wide variety of tools, such as learning and reflective journals, reports, reflection papers, case studies, or narratives. These types of assignments are increasingly popular in applied disciplines such as marketing, business, accounting, nursing, health sciences, social work or education. Can you think about the event in light of broader contexts (e.g. social, cultural, historical, political, etc.)? Can you challenge or question your own responses and/or actions during or after the event, or those of other people involved? Critical reflection essay in Social Work (extract). Stages / function Level of reflection. The incident occurred during my first fieldwork placement, in a children's service.