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This study examined social care workers' understanding of self-awareness and reflection, the impact of reflection on their practice, and the factors which support and/or impede reflection in their practice. Given the limited evidence base in general on the use of reflection in social care practice, this qualitative study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the role of self-awareness and reflection in social care practice among a small group of social care practitioners in Ireland. The study included interviews with seven social care workers who were pursuing a postgraduate qualification in social care practice. The main findings indicate that the participants had a general understanding of self-awareness and how to reflect on practice with critical incident reports being identified as the most common tool used to reflect. The findings also suggest that the role of self-awareness and reflection in social care practice appears to be an ideological concept which the participants believed to be an essential professional skill, but in fact it was not exclusively employed in everyday practice.

Introduction

Self-awareness and reflection have been described as the cornerstone of professional development in social care practice (Mainemelis, Boyatzis & Kolb, 2002; Laming, 2009; Anghel, Amas & Hicks, 2010; Urdang, 2010). The ability to engage in reflection has been found to build competence, prevent burnout and to create life-long learning within professionals (Schon, 1983; Loughran, 2000; Yip, 2006; Finlay, 2008; Urdang, 2010). Carper (1978) describes self-awareness as a process of coming to know oneself, although within different disciplines, the understanding of what reflective practice is varies considerably (Fook, White & Gardner, 2006). Despite this, some consensus has been achieved in defining it. Generally, it is understood to be a process of learning through and from experience and gaining new insights of self and/or practice. Finlay (2008) argues that this involves examining the assumptions of everyday practice and claims that practitioners become more self-aware when they critically evaluate their responses to everyday practice situations.

Schön (1983) suggests that professionals can become more aware of their inherent knowledge and learn from their experiences through the processes of *reflecting-on-action* and *reflecting-in-action*. Reflecting-on-action involves, analysing and evaluating past practices with a view to gaining insight in order to improve future practice. Reflecting-in-action

requires practitioners to examine their responses and experiences as they occur. In both processes, practitioners connect with their feelings and relate their responses and experiences to the relevant theories (Finlay, 2008).

According to Finlay (2008) there are three main models of reflection which practitioners tend to use in to aid their reflective practice. Gibbs's Reflective Cycle (1998) highlights the reflective process as a continual structured process, although it has been argued that a more critical approach to reflection is required (Finlay, 2008). Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) provided a three stage model of reflection which can be applied to the different levels of the learner's needs. However, this model has been criticised for its retrospective focus (Finlay, 2008). John's (1994) model of structured reflection offers a comprehensive checklist of questions in order to facilitate reflection. Finlay (2008) argues that this prescriptive model can be criticised for reducing the opportunities for practitioners to use their own intuitions, values and priorities. Practitioners may choose a model of reflection depending on the experience they had or the practitioner's ability to reflect, although models of reflection need to be applied selectively and with flexibility (Finlay, 2008).

Engaging in Reflective Practice: Benefits and Challenges

Irrespective of the model that is used, reflective practice has been claimed to have many benefits (Ruch, 2000; Urdang, 2010; Yip 2006; Johns 2009). Jude and Regan (2010) in their small scale qualitative study exploring reflective practice in social work found that the participants benefited from the experience of reflecting as it created new ways of thinking and learning which informed their practice.

Gibbs (2001), in a study of 22 child protection workers in Australia, found that insufficient attention was given to the emotional intrusiveness of work in social work practice, to the building of resilience in workers, and to the implications of adult learning through reflective supervision. He concluded that a focus on the emotional impact of practice and the use of reflective learning models nurture professional development in practitioners.

Although there are benefits to reflection, there are also obstacles identified in engaging in reflective practice. Finlay (2008) suggests that busy, over- stretched professionals are likely to find reflective practice demanding and problematic. She maintains that mechanical, routinised and unthinking ways of doing reflective practice are the result. Boud and Walker (1998) maintain that professional concerns become apparent when reflective practice is carried out poorly. In these cases, the point of reflective practice is missed. Also, if

applied uncritically, reflections can reinforce prejudices and bad practice (Boud and Walker, 1998). Quinn (2000) proposes that an inappropriate use of reflection can devalue a practitioner's professional work rather than promote it, although Brookfield (1995) contends that reflection if used thoughtfully and delicately can be an empowering and positive process for practitioners which in turn can enhance the practitioners' self-awareness.

Urdang (2010) argues that social work education focuses too much on cognitive theories and evidence-based treatments. However a number of methods have been designed which can develop the skills required for self-awareness and reflection. These methods include the experiential techniques of reflection and other creative mediums such as drama, painting, sand tray and movement. These methods were found to have developed flexibility, analytic and interpersonal skills, and facilitated group cohesion and learning in both students and social care practitioners (Anghel, Amas & Hicks, 2010; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002).

Common Tools for Reflective Practice

Although Urdang (2010) has argued that education in self-awareness and reflection builds a foundation of knowledge in social care practitioners, it is important to identify the tools used to engage in reflective practice. The most commonly used tools for reflective practice are critical incidents, reflective diaries and supervision (Laming, 2009). The description and analysis of critical incidents have been found to enable practitioners to consider the wider contextual issues, thus promoting critical thinking (Griffin, 2003). Reflective diaries have also been highlighted as an effective method for reflection (Finlay, 2008), although they have been criticised for their lengthy process (Quinn, 2000). Supervision has been recognised for the safe reflective space it can provide to practitioners in a busy working environment (Peach & Horner 2007), although, there is a lack of evidence based research for the overall effectiveness of supervision in relation to the models of supervision and the outcomes for practitioners (Carpenter, Webb & Bostock, 2013).

In summary, self-awareness has been described as a deep knowledge of oneself, bringing greater understanding of practitioners' self-awareness which in turn, encourages the worker to engage in more effective relationships with service users (King & Appleton, 1997) with reflection being key to this process. The research and literature identified here has focused mainly on social workers experiences of reflection and self-awareness in their work with reflection on practice mainly occurring through reflective diaries (Quinn, 2000; Finlay)

and supervision (Bogo, Paterson, Tufford & King, 2011; Peach, 2007). This study focuses on the experiences of social care workers on the relevance of self-awareness and reflection in their everyday work, in particular focusing on the ways in which social workers incorporate reflective practice into to their work as well as identifying the benefits and challenges for workers in the development of their self-awareness and reflective practice skills.

Research Design

Individual semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method for this study on the basis that they would facilitate a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences (Seideman, 2013). Self-awareness and reflection are particularly individual processes so individual interviews was the preferred approach. This flexible approach allowed for an exploration of any unexpected experiences which may have been revealed by the participants throughout the interview process (Mayrut & Morehouse, 1994).

Participants

The sample group was purposively chosen with the eligibility criteria of participants having a degree in social care and at least three years work experience in social care. These criteria were used to ensure that participants had the opportunity to learn about self- awareness and reflection and to practise it in the workplace. The participants were selected from students studying a Masters in Advanced Social Care Practice. Seven students agreed to participate which included six females and one male with practice experience ranging from three to 20 years. The participants worked in residential child care, disability services and domestic violence services.

Procedure

To recruit the participants from the course a short presentation on the study was given to the class group as well as email being sent to the class with an information sheet and consent letter attached. Once the volunteers made contact, arrangements were made as to the time and place that suited the participants in order to conduct the interviews. A digital dictaphone was used to record the interviews.

Ethics

The research proposal was approved by the ethics committee of the third level institute in which Master's degree was being undertaken. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Some of the sample group were classmates of the researcher and as such prospective participants may have found it difficult to say 'no' to a fellow classmate who was trying to recruit volunteers. Therefore, when giving information to the prospective participants, it was emphasised that the study was completely voluntary and that there was no obligation for anyone to participate. Participants were also reminded that they could terminate their participation at any time, without reasons. To ensure anonymity, initials were used instead of names.

Findings and Discussion

The data were analysed in relation to the topics relevant to the objective of the study in exploring social care workers understanding and use of self-awareness and reflection in their practice with a number of themes identified. This article reports on three main themes: participants understanding of self-awareness and reflection, how the participants practised reflection and the factors which they felt supported and/or impeded self-awareness and reflection.

Participants' understanding of self-awareness and reflection

Participants had a general understanding of self-awareness and reflection as well as its relevance to their practice as social care workers. Almost half of the participants could name models of reflection such as Schön's reflecting-on-action and reflecting-in action, Kolb's learning cycle and Gibbs's reflective cycle. However they could not provide any details about the models and reported that they did not use the models when they were reflecting. Only one, who was a supervisor for both staff and students, could describe a model. In relation to their understanding of self-awareness and reflection, the participants reported that the reflections they made had developed their awareness of their behaviours, prejudices and tolerances, their values and opinions, the emotional impact of working with vulnerable people and their ability to empathise with service users they worked with:

> Subconsciously we all have prejudices and feelings and thoughts about people, and you have to really think about that […] looking at why you act in a certain way rather than just taking it for granted and why you feel certain things. (Participant D)

> If you don't know what your boundaries are, you're no use to anybody. I used to overly emotionally engage sometimes as well but I'm also aware of that. (Participant F)

Similar to claims made by Finlay (2008), the participants appeared to evaluate their responses to everyday situations and through this developed their self-awareness. It seems that the participants' experience of reflection is similar to that described by Ruch (2000) who found that the process of reflecting facilitated empathy and supported insights into how a practitioner's background can affect both learning and practice:

> How your reaction might impact somebody else's responses and somebody else's interaction with you, you empathise, your tone of voice. I think it's good for the service users, how you treat them and how you respond to them. (Participant E)

The participants reported having little input from their educational programmes on the concepts of self-awareness and reflective practice:

> No. No we didn't do anything like that in college. (Participant A)

> I think the ability to do that is something that's very absent from our education and from even our practice. (Participant B)

Similar to those reported by Urdang, 2010, findings here suggests that education in social care had been dominated by cognitive theories and evidence-based treatments rather than the development of self-awareness and reflective practice. However the possibility that the participants may not have remembered being taught skills in self-awareness and reflection as the majority of participants had left college eight years ago or more should be considered. Nonetheless it could be argued that if the educational programme had focused significantly on these skills, these practitioners would have had remembered learning them. One participant who finished college three years prior to data collection reported the use of reflective diaries while out on placement as the focus of self-awareness and reflection throughout her education. This could suggest that educational programmes are focusing more on reflection in recent years:

> I think generally it [reflective diary] could be useful but because of the context, it was an assignment, and you were aware that it was being marked….it defeats the purpose of it because you're not being open and honest. (Participant D)

When asked if she used a reflective diary now, Participant D responded:

> No I don't. I never really thought of it to be honest.

Another participant reported:

> Reflective diaries, we used to bring off on placement but as the years went on, it was more about deadlines and meeting those deadlines. (Participant C)

In relation to education, participants suggested that more needs to be done about self-care in the education of social care practitioners:

> I think there should be more emphasis in college on how to help yourself after you help somebody else. (Participant E)

Two participants reported that some training from their organisations had included self-awareness and reflection for practitioners. However, one of these training courses had been removed from the service as other training requirements took precedence:

> I used to be a TCI trainer and we used to do a lot about self-awareness and how our body language and how our eye contact you know and how all these factors are pivotal in either improving a person's quality of life…but I suppose again unfortunately that was taken out of the service because it was felt that there was other training that was required so that whole aspect about self-awareness was removed. (Participant C)

Engaging in reflective practice

Critical incident reports were found to be one of the most common tools used in order to reflect. These critical incident reports were provided by the participants' organisations. The participants reported that at the end of the critical incident report there was a section which encouraged practitioners to reflect on an incident by describing it, noting how the practitioner felt about it, what the practitioner did during the incident and what the practitioner could do differently in the future:

> It would kind of be just to see how you're feeling now and do you know like looking back on what happened in the incident what you've done within the incident and to look for future like if it happened again like what could you do. (Participant A)

One participant reported that he was dissatisfied with the critical incident report form his organisation provided as it did not offer sufficient space to write a thorough reflection. Another participant shared a similar viewpoint and argued that merely the last paragraph of a

critical incident report on reflection with very little space to write, mirrored the absence of a reflection culture in her organisation:

> There would be certain sections of forms that you would have to fill out and say 'ok, what have we learned from this' but if you look at…and maybe it's indicative of the way services are in regards to reflection in that it's the very last question with only a little space so when we have a culture of that, the last paragraph…it's not really reflected then in our general practice. (Participant C)

This suggests that critical incident reports vary in their format and reflectiveness across organisations and furthermore, that the reflective culture of the organisation could impact this method of reflection. Perhaps organisations should provide a standardised incident report form with sufficient space to allow for a thorough reflection following a critical incident. As participants stated that crucial incident reports were the primary method of facilitating reflection it suggests that reflection is only emphasised after a significant event rather than in daily practice.

The use of the critical incident form is congruent with reports from Finlay (2008) and Laming (2009) who claim that critical incidents are one of the most common tools used for reflective practice. This provides practitioners with an opportunity for structured reflection on an incident and encourages practitioners to use the reflection process effectively. However, these reports are only used after a significant incident, which does not imply that practitioners use this process of reflection in their everyday practice.

The majority of participants used supervision as a means to reflect, although participants were unsatisfied with the infrequent amount of supervision they received. Similar to practitioners in Bogo et al., (2011) study, interviewees in this study reported that this lack of time to engage in supervision affected their ability to reflect appropriately and develop their self-awareness:

> But it's not always possible with the time constraints we have at frontline at the moment…. there's nothing from an organisational perspective that would allow me the time to sit down and say 'okay, let's look at what we did for the first part of the morning or for the first part of the afternoon and so forth. (Participant C)

Other participants reported that they reflected in teams or on the way home in the car. However, they said that the team reflections were more task oriented than reflective and the participants did not describe their reflections according to textbook explanations of reflection:

> It's supposed to be done as a team so you start by planning the shift and you plan the shift with team and you allocate jobs, you allocate A, B, C and D to different people… then at

the end of the day you reflect that….has the work been done, was it done well and how do people feel the day went…I think it's more of a tick checklist of the jobs that are done and the jobs that are yet to be done rather than a reflection on actual personal work practice. (Participant B)

So I'd go home in the evenings, driving home thinking 'oh I shouldn't have said that or maybe I should have said it this way' or maybe that person could do with another intervention rather than me. (Participant F)

Factors that support/impede reflection

While discussing factors that support and/or impede reflection, the participants' responses fluctuated between hypothetical assumptions and actual experiences. When they spoke about the factors that supported their reflection, the participants spoke about hypothetical supports for the practitioner in general. It appeared that the participants had no opportunity to identify factors that supported them as they had reported not having engaged in significant reflection mainly due to the impeding factors. When the participants spoke about the factors which impeded their reflections, the participants gave responses which appeared to be based on their actual experiences. This is a limitation of the study as the factors found to support a practitioner are theoretical and do not have the equivalent impact on the findings of the study as the factors that impeded reflection which were factors based on actual experience.

When discussing what supported reflection participants mentioned factors such as: a good manager, an increased knowledge of the skills of self-awareness and reflection through training and education and good supervision. The participants reported that a good manager, who plans and structures time to reflect, advocates for reflection and role models reflective practice would be supportive in their work environment. They stated that if reflective practice did not come from the manager, front-line staff would not consider the importance of being self-aware and reflective:

In terms of how I feel about what would help is definitely management… but the manager has to enforce it to make sure the shift reflection is done and team meetings happen to make sure supervision happens, however, there's a fourth bit there that they have to ensure that staff are reflecting in a different way not just about task orientated outcomes and young people. It has to be about themselves and that's what I mean about training, I don't think people can do that themselves. (Participant B)

The participants also said that training should be provided by their organisations in order to create a culture of reflecting on practice so it would become a part of the daily routine. They reported that this would encourage practitioners to recognise the importance of engaging more in reflective practice:

> If they had a mandatory training on self-awareness and reflecting em that would be really beneficial for the service users and I think that whole openness would come out then, to see it as a positive and to see it as this can enhance performance for the service and the service users. (Participant C)

As mentioned above, when discussing factors that impede reflection the participants' responses seemed to be more grounded in their experiences. They reported that the factors which impeded reflection included: time constraints, a non-reflective organisational culture, a lack of supervision and a limited understanding of self-awareness and reflection among practitioners in general. The majority of participants reported that time constraint was one of the main impeding factors. This was associated with staff shortages, heavy workloads and busy work environments. The participants' views of this impeding factor is similar to that of Yip (2006) where she described inappropriate reflective conditions including busy work environments with demanding workloads. Yip (2006) suggests that these inappropriate conditions can be destructive to the practitioner's self-development, thus causing reflection to be seen as an added burden rather than a support for the practitioner. This in turn could lead to other issues such as illness, burnout and higher levels of staff turnover.

Another reported factor to impede reflective practice was a non-reflective organisational culture:

> But it's not in the organisations culture to reflect. You know, you come in and you start work and it's not in their, would you say ethos to have that kind of time, or encouraging reflecting. There's no kind of encouragement to reflect (Participant G)

The participants implied that once the organisation was not promoting a reflective culture that the importance of reflecting was missed by the majority of staff. The participants suggested that if reflecting was part of the everyday routine, this would support them to reflect more:

> There is nothing from an organisational perspective saying 'this is what we need to do' unless it's from a critical incident perspective that we would fill out….there would be certain sections of forms that you would have to fill out and say 'ok, what have we learned from this' but if you look at…and maybe it's indicative of the way services are in regards to reflection in that it's the very last question with only a little space so when we have a culture of that, the last paragraph…it's not really reflected then in our general practice. (Participant C)

The participants reported that the other factors that impeded their reflective practice were their limited access to supervision and their limited understanding of self-awareness and reflection. This suggests that if organisations could create a reflective culture that demonstrates a value in reflecting by providing the training, the time and the supervision

suggested to be required to reflect effectively, practitioners would feel more supported to reflect and hence develop their self-awareness. However, it might also be argued that social care practitioners should be more assertive in promoting the importance of reflection in the organisations in which they work.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that while social care practitioners generally understand the concepts of self-awareness and reflection, they tend not to reflect constructively unless they are reporting on a critical incident. Furthermore, while all participants identified reflection and self-awareness as important factors in promoting client-centred social care practice they said they do not have the time or adequate support from their organisation to reflect effectively and develop their self-awareness. The role of self-awareness and reflection in social care practice for this sample appears to be an ideological concept which the participants believe to be an essential professional skill but in fact it is not consistently employed in daily practice. Most reflective practice happens after critical incidents have occurred. Although this was a small scale study, it provides insight into practitioners' understanding of reflective practice in the social care field and how they engage in it in practice. Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are suggested.

Firstly to facilitate the ingraining of reflective practice in future practitioners education programmes should continue to ensure a stronger emphasis is placed on the value of and the development of skills in self-awareness and reflection for graduates. Secondly the incorporation of the use of self-awareness and reflection skills should be more clearly made evident in national standards of practice relevant to social care practitioners in order to reinforce the importance of these skills and create a reflective culture at organisational level. Organisations in social care settings could also focus further on incorporating training on reflection similar to that of other mandatory courses in their training schedules. Given the pending introduction of registration for social care workers the importance of workers being encouraged and required to develop their reflective practice and self-awareness skills is important for any profession working with marginalised and vulnerable groups. Finally as this was a small scale study, it would useful for a larger scale study be conducted on the use of the models of reflection and the impact of self-awareness and reflection on social care practice.

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