

Social Work Students' Thoughts on Self-Reflection: A Qualitative Study Based on Reflective Journaling

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Abstract

This article examines Estonian undergraduate social work students' (n = 39) thoughts on self-reflection through reflective journaling format. The study indicates that students found written words and graphics (reflective journaling and mind mapping) as most efficient forms of techniques of self-reflection. Students' reflections suggest that comparing these to Schön's explanation of the process of reflection, social work students relate to reflection-on-action. Overall, students reported that they need to develop self-assessment skills. Practice implications are discussed and recommendations for future research are outlined.

Keywords: self-reflection, awareness raising, social work education, students, reflective journaling

1. Introduction

The field of social work and child welfare is complex and full of challenges (McPherson & Barnett, 2006; Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008; Munro, 2010; LeBlanc, Regehr, Shlonsky, & Bogo, 2012; Mainstone, 2014); decisions are difficult by nature (e.g., whether the child is in need and whether or not to remove a child from the family, including child custody evaluations), especially for the novice. The prerequisite for better decision-making is the practice of systematic self-reflection (Schön, 1983: see Amble, 2012). Reflection on practice enables to examine decisions made and the knowledge that has evolved within practice (Heath, 1998, p. 1055). Self-reflection is significant to students' training as it enhances their personal and professional development in practice (Chaddock, Thwaites, Bennett-Levy, & Freeston, 2014; Gale & Schröder, 2014; Gün, 2010; Laverty, 2012); thus, self-reflection increases professional growth and competence (Autry & Walker, 2011; Eng & Pai 2014; Langley & Brown, 2010), this in turn increases the quality of social work.

Therefore, social work education has a responsibility to prepare students for this work, including the challenges they may encounter. The objective of this article is to explore social work students' thoughts on self-reflection through reflective journaling. The intention of this qualitative study was to find more specific methods for social work educators in the studied university to encourage/facilitate students' self-reflection during their studies and practice in order to increase their personal and professional competence. To provide context for the study, a brief overview of the literature related to the conceptual basis for the study is provided.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Reflective Practice and Self-Reflection in the Professional Context

Jarvis (1992) defines reflective practice in regard to improving professional practice (see Rosin, 2015, p. 89) — “form of practice which seeks to problematize many situations of professional performance so that they can become potential learning situations and so the practitioners can continue to learn, grow, and develop in and through their practice” (p. 180). Reflective practice in the professional context is most identified with Schön's writings (see Dinkelman, 2003; McCoyd & Kerson, 2013; Thorpe, 2004). Schön (1983) explained the process of reflection in terms of reflection-in-action (carried out during the event/action) as well as reflection-on-action

(carried out after the event/action) (see Cornish & Jenkins, 2012, p. 161), proposing reflection as a strategy to integrate theory with practice (Langley & Brown, 2010) and providing means by which experience can be understood and generalized (Harvey, Coulson, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto, 2010). Schön (1987) used the term “professional artistry” to refer “competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain and conflicted situations of practice” (p. 22).

Yip (2006) defines self-reflection as a process of self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue and self-observation. The self is salient here (Brebels, De Cremer, Sedikides, & van Hiel, 2013). Self-reflection can improve personal and professional awareness (Ganzer & Zauderer, 2013; Harris, 2008; Norberg, 2014), helping to construct new and deeper understanding of the experience (see Ip, Lui, Chien, Lee, Lam & Lee, 2012), which may in turn impact positively on therapeutic competence (Bennett-Levy, Turner, Beaty, Smith, Paterson, & Farmer 2001; Nesbit, 2012). The deeper the reflection, the stronger is the awareness (Yip, 2006). Self-reflection, then, can be seen as a useful tool through which practitioner continually explores everyday practice, personal belief systems, which influence their perceptions of others and their interpretations of motivations, and attitudes (Autry & Walker, 2011; Carr, 1996; Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Pompeo & Heller Levitt, 2014). Thus, reflective practice is a spontaneous process of self-recall of past experience, self-articulation of situations and internalization of professional knowledge into actual situations and contexts (Yip, 2006, p. 779).

2.2. Self-Reflection in Social Work Education

The use of self-reflection is considered a significant aspect of excellence in a number of professions, including social work (Autry & Walker, 2011, p. 44). Goodsett (2014) refers that an ability and willingness to reflect can be an important factor in improving the complicated decision-making process. Social workers reflect on the decisions that they had made regarding the case, think critically and describe what they would change the next time they had a similar case (Klimova, 2014; McCoyd & Kerson, 2013). The role of the social worker is to reflect on cases — what did work and what didn't work, what can be done differently the next time (Bannink, 2006). According to Pappas (2010), reflection involves thinking critically about the experience and questioning the experience. This kind of reflection can contribute to searching for new perspectives and new solutions, developing practitioner's strengths, abilities and potentials in practice (Yip, 2006). Thus, a promotion of social work students' self-reflection may contribute to more conscious thinking about what they have learned. Furthermore, reflecting on past and present experiences affects practitioners' interactions with clients (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012), including successful and effective application of relationship-based practice (Ruch, 2005); also deal with stresses in productive ways (Chohan, 2010; Lyke, 2009). Pompeo & Heller Levitt (2014) emphasise that practitioners have a responsibility to themselves, their clients, and the profession to engage in reflective practice.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The study was conducted among second year undergraduate social work students participating an elective class “*Basics of Child Protection*” (4 credits, including 30 h face-to-face teaching and 74 h self-directed learning) at one university in Estonia. Self-reflection was one of the leading topics of the class. The self-reflection theme was mainly based on the book by Maclean (2010) “*The social work pocket guide to ... reflective practice*”). During this class reflective practice and self-reflection was discussed generally and related to child welfare work (teaching style: lectures, exercises, case analysis, discussions, e-learning, video analysis, reflective journal). All 44 students who enrolled in the class were invited to participate in the study; 39 students provided agreement, representing a response rate of 88.6%. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 years. Gender distribution shows that most of the respondents were female ($n = 37$).

3.2. Data Collection

To achieve the study objective, reflective journaling format was used for data collection. There are different approaches available to encourage self-reflection among students; one of these is reflective journaling, which was used as a tool for developing social work students' skills in reflective practice (Maclean, 2010) but also as a data collection method for this study. There is an increasing amount of writings about reflective journaling and several authors have addressed the value of reflective journals (Epp, 2008; Harris, 2008; Goodsett, 2014; Wong, Kember, Chung, & Yan, 1995; Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Laverty, 2012; Langley & Brown, 2010; Forneris & Peden-McAlpine, 2006; Thorpe, 2004).

For purposes of this research, reflective journals refer to written documents that students create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning (Thorpe, 2004, p. 328). Reflective journaling enables students to practice critical analysis and reasoning, increasing the likelihood of becoming reflective practitioners (Langley & Brown, 2010). Reflective journaling can be considered as a supportive learning technique and environment for influencing the process of students becoming reflective practitioner positively, thus, improving their professional practices (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012; Ganzer & Zauderer, 2013; Harris, 2008).

According to Goodsett (2014), reflective journaling can be stream of consciousness, answering questions, or have a more guided structure. At the end of each class, students were given questions to reflect their thoughts about discussed subject (e.g., new ideas and concepts). Students were instructed to record their answers in their journals. At the end of the class (November 2014), the students' journals were reviewed by the authors of the current article in order to identify students' thoughts on self-reflection, and also to gain feedback for the course. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study and were not compensated.

3.3. Data Analysis

Four points of the journal are analysed in this article: (i) importance of self-reflection in social work, (ii) most useful techniques for developing reflective practice, (iii) useful models/strategies for promoting self-reflection, and (iv) central aspects to the development of a reflective practitioner. The data was analysed using the principles of content analysis, informed primarily by Padgett (2008), consisting of unitising, categorising and pattern searching. As the number of students was reasonably small, the data was manually coded. First, the responses were read through in order to gain an overall understanding of the nature of the data. Coding involved repeated readings of the journals to discover patterns in order to code the data into potential meaning units. Next, after responses were read independently and initial labels (sub-categories, categories and domains) compiled, the author and the co-author discussed the findings and establish a list of labels (these were compared and refined, and listed under existing or new labels). Consistency in the common labels was achieved by reaching a consensus. The responses were then read again to extract quotes supporting these labels. Thus, the reliability of the data analysis was enhanced by two researchers (the author and the co-author) conducting the data analysis. Sample extracts for nature of questions are presented in tables to illustrate the connections between the raw data and the conclusions drawn. The responses were quantified in order to see the frequencies of responses. Data analysis was conducted in the Estonian language, and afterwards translated into English.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis, it was discovered that social work students related **the importance of self-reflection in social work** to two main domains — self-reflection enhances: (i) social workers' personal and (ii) professional development, see Table 1.

Table 1: Importance of Self-Reflection in Social Work: Domains, Categories, Subcategories and Frequencies

Three main keywords*	Frequency
Social workers' personal development	
Self-knowledge	36
Self-awareness	17
Self-consciousness	14
Social workers' professional development	
Professional identity	17
Social work practice related	
Constructing new meanings and solutions	27
Problem solving method	10
Understanding the client	8
Burnout prevention	2

*In total, students provided 43 different keywords

As reported in table, students' responses focused most often on the self, the personal development, this in turn promotes professional growth and quality of social work in general.

Students emphasized words “process” (e.g., “*Self-reflection is a process of your self-development*”), “personal growth” (e.g., “*It brings changes in conceptual perspective and pushes to inner growth*”), and “connection” (e.g., “*Self-reflection enables to assess the interrelationships between different phenomenon*”) in the context of these themes.

Social work students found most **useful techniques for developing reflective practice** as follows: reflective journaling ($n = 25$), mind mapping ($n = 13$), supervision ($n = 7$), critical incident analysis ($n = 4$), and using a critical friend ($n = 2$).

The students’ perceptions of the value of journaling as a means of enhancing reflective practice referred to (i) critical thinking development (e.g., “*One of the most crucial benefits of the journal is supporting to develop critical thinking, which helps me to understand and analyse situations*”), (ii) ventilation of feelings (e.g., “*I can write all frustrations in the journal without anyone criticizing me, it helps to deal with emotions and thoughts*”), (iii) re-evaluating experiences, including learning from the experience, and (iv) in-depth analysis (e.g., “*Writing down all the details enables to analyse in-depth, to reflect back on previous experiences and think what can be done differently, meaning what did I do wrong and what can I do better and what do I need in order to do that*”). Mind mapping and supervision were also identified as effective techniques. According to students, strengths of mind mapping lie in its visual, structured (structuring of knowledge) form; supervision provides feedback and alternative view on the matter.

There are several models of reflective practice, which social workers can draw on. Social work students reflected on five models they recognized as **useful models/strategies** for themselves, see Table 2.

Table 2: Useful Models/Strategies for Promoting Self-Reflection

Model	Frequency	Rationale and frequency
Gibbs’ reflective cycle	16	Evaluation of good and bad ($n = 15$), incorporates feelings ($n = 10$), simple ($n = 3$), logical ($n = 2$), comprehensive ($n = 2$)
Bartons’ framework	13	Guiding questions ($n = 13$), comprehensive ($n = 1$), concrete ($n = 1$)
DI EP strategy	6	Incorporates feelings ($n = 5$), evaluation of good and bad ($n = 4$), concrete ($n = 2$), simple ($n = 2$)
Boud, Keogh and Walker model	3	Returning to the experience ($n = 3$)
Johns’ model of structured reflection	1	Outcome-based ($n = 1$)

As seen in Table 2, the nature of responses about rationale suggests a focus on (i) evaluation of good and bad (e.g., “*Assessing good and bad is very important as this way you can learn from your mistakes*”), (ii) analysing feelings (e.g., “*In my opinion, effective model has to inspire the social worker to take ones feelings and thoughts into account; social worker has to deal with complicated decisions and this may trigger different emotions*”), (iii) proposing guiding questions for analysis (e.g., “*These three questions [Bartons’ framework: what, so what and now what?] are easy to use for analysing yourself, actions and the case*”), and (iv) simplicity (e.g., “*The reason I find Gibbs mode effective, is for the reason of simplicity, logical, yet in-depth, encouraging to reflect on all what happened*”).

Analysis of the last question analysed in this article suggests that the **development of a reflective practitioner** among studied students requires certain decision, self-analysis about different issues, and taking some actions to apply the theory in practice, see Table 3.

Table 3: Development of a Reflective Practitioner: Domains, Categories, Subcategories and Frequencies

Central to the development of a reflective practitioner	Frequency
Decision	
Conscious self-reflection	29
Self-analysis*	
Learning needs	14
Mistakes	9
Doubts/fears	7
Decision-making processes	4
Skills	
Learning from the experience	23
Constructive critical thinking	18
Asking questions	9
Positive thinking	8
Collecting new information	8
Avoiding self-blame	7
Unbiased thinking	7
Time management	4
Goal setting	3
Actions	
Practicing self-reflection	
Using specific models (e.g., Bartons' framework, DIEP strategy)	7
Reflective journaling	5
Asking constructive feedback	4

*The word "self-analysis" was mentioned by 32 students

Student responses (more than half of the students) underline the importance of first making the decision to consciously practice self-reflection (e.g., "Conscious self-reflection is the keyword here. *It is typical not to think of the decision after making it. I think the same can be said about child welfare workers today, based on my experience — they make important decisions but they don't analyse the process afterwards*"). Furthermore, self-analysis is the basis for developing of self-reflection (e.g., "*Self-reflection does not develop itself, you need to analyse yourself, what needs to be learned in order to be a better reflector*").

Social work students reflected on a number of categories related to skills, some for improving self-analysis, others creating the environment for self-reflection, e.g., time management, asking questions (from self, colleagues and clients), unbiased thinking, and positive thinking. Learning from the experience (behaviour, decisions, actions, feelings) was repeatedly referred by the students (e.g., "*We are modelling our behaviour through past experiences; therefore, we need to look back and understand about our actions and consequences, what could have been differently*"). Some of the students' responses referred to learning to think positively, as self-reflection is analysing both negative and positive (best practices), also finding solutions, not blaming yourself. Words with negative connotation (e.g., mistake, fault, guilty) were mentioned throughout journals.

Social work students implied the need to learn to be open-minded; this is not only important in the context of self-reflection but also in working with clients. Finally, some students' responses pointed out their willingness to start with the process of becoming a reflective social worker during their studies (e.g., using above mentioned models/strategies, reflective journal and asking feedback), prior their social work career (e.g., "*I want to start this process today, so that self-reflection would be normal part of my work as a professional social worker*").

5. Discussion

The current study implies that social work students' perceptions on self-reflection are consistent with theoretical concepts discussed in the beginning of this article — self-reflection improves personal and professional awareness and professional growth, promotes constructing new meanings and solutions and learning from experiences. Training in self-reflection that highlights the systematic questioning process of reflection is likely to deepen the quality of self-understanding (Nesbit, 2012).

Nevertheless, comparing findings to Schön's explanation of the process of reflection, social work students relate to reflection-on-action. Thus, the concept of reflection-in-action needs to be discussed further with the students.

Another important finding to be addressed here emphasizes the need to promote strengths-based thinking. Goodsett (2014) points out that reflection is not purely a negative activity; it is possible and important to recognize positive aspects (including measuring progress) as well. Students' thoughts of self-reflection in the current study were more connected to negative activity. "Negative kind of thinking" seems to be part of social work in Estonia. Study on Estonian graduate social work students' approach to clients within the domain of child protection assessment found that students tend to focus more on a traditional deficit-based approach; the nature of the questions indicated judgmental responses, the use of labelling and diagnosing (Toros, 2014). Child protective workers on the other hand have a reputation of being in a "punishing role", as the focus is placed more on deficits and failure (Toros, Tiko, & Saia, 2013). Being aware of one's own biases, prejudices and limitations is stressed in social work practice, and practitioners are encouraged to reflect on the work they are doing (Wang, 2012, p. 55). Furthermore, practitioners engaged in the self-reflective process may change their initial positions and ideas through this process (Pompeo & Heller Levitt, 2014). Therefore, social work education needs to ensure that positive and unbiased thinking are rooted in the training of students for a more systematic approach with possibilities to practice acquired knowledge and skills, also other skills needed to developed in order to reflect on and evaluate self-practice (e.g., reflection of feelings, learning to ask questions, self-assessment skills, critical thinking, etc.).

Developing the habit of self-reflection encourages students to continue learning throughout their professional career (Rosenfeld, 2014). This should be the aim of the education — promoting students to think about their learning experience and questioning parts of the experience (Pappas, 2010). Providing students with a supportive learning techniques and environment can influence positively this process (see Ganzer & Zauderer, 2013). In the current study, students found written words and graphics (reflective journaling and mind mapping) as most efficient forms of techniques of self-reflection. Langley & Brown (2010) suggest that reflective journaling is an intensely personal process that allows students to recognize and record their strengths and weaknesses and deal with them in a safe environment. This kind of supportive needs-based learning would more likely ensure more efficient outcomes for students as reflective practitioners; this in turn, would enhance the competence and quality social work services.

5.1. Implications for Practice and Research

Several practical outcomes can be mentioned. First, the findings indicate a need to focus more on developing students' self-assessment skills, promoting self-reflection systematically throughout the social work curriculum. Second, students' reflection on useful techniques suggests that reflective journaling is a valuable method of self-reflection, facilitating reflection on personal and classroom experiences. The author has started to use more self-reflection with students, with every class including a journaling for reflections on students' knowledge and thoughts; at the end of every class two to three questions related to the topic were provided in order to analyse and reflect about their learning experience (e.g., Three important keywords from today's class and explain why; 3–2–1: three new skills/knowledge/information I have learned, two questions I have and one thought/skill that I would like to explore/develop further etc.) (Toros, 2014).

There is little research about the given field in Estonia; hence, some of the important research topics are related to studying self-reflection among social work educators (exploring to what extent they use self-reflection in their teaching), social workers'/child welfare workers' views and experiences with self-reflection.

5.2. Limitations

There are several limitations which apply to this study. One limitation that is similar to those of most qualitative studies is in the qualitative sampling. The findings of data are exclusive to the particular study contexts and caution must be taken in generalizing the findings beyond this sample. Another limitation is the use of only one data collection method. The use of several data collection methods (e.g., interviews) addressing this subject would allow making more definite conclusions. Despite these limitations, this study implies a number of skills social work students need for developing reflective practitioner, also useful techniques/models to strengthen the knowledge and applying it in practice.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that social work students need to be supported in order to foster self-reflection. Given that social workers/child welfare workers must exercise a high degree of professional judgment in their work, there is a need for a greater understanding of analysis of the work/experiences and learning from it in order to empower clients/families through developing a respectful and effective helping relationship that is utilized to facilitate and achieve positive change and well-being. Additionally, the social work curriculum needs to be reviewed in order to promote self-reflective practice.

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