The Human Services Pocket Guide to Reflective Practice
By Siobhan Maclean


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WHAT?

It is generally agreed that reflective practice is an essential aspect of good practice in human services. However, there is very little agreement on the concept and defining reflective practice is not straightforward.

This pocket guide therefore begins by exploring the following questions:

- What is reflection?
- What is reflective practice?
- What is critical practice?
- What is reflexivity?
- What are the origins of reflective practice?

Thinking through these questions should help you to be clear about perhaps the most important question of all:

WHAT IS REFLECTION ALL ABOUT?

How?

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Reflection is:

- the mental process of trying to structure or restructure an experience, a problem or existing knowledge or insights.
  - Korthagen (2001: 58)

- a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyze, evaluate and so inform learning about practice.
  - Reid (1993: 305)

- active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.
  - Dewey (1933: 118)

A reflection in a mirror is an exact replica of what is in front of it. Reflection in professional practice, however, gives back not what it is, but what it might be, an improvement on the original.

- Biggs (1999: 6)
Why is reflective practice important to human services practitioners?

It is generally agreed that reflective practice is important in human services because:

- It is a key aspect of professionalism
- It is intrinsically linked with learning and so can enhance professional development
- It improves accountability

- It can lead to better human services practice and improved outcomes for service users
- It helps practitioners to explore the basic assumptions underpinning their work and therefore helps to ensure ethical practice
- The skills and qualities required for reflective practice are very similar to the skills and qualities which are needed for best practice in human services
- Service users deserve to work with practitioners who recognize the vital importance of the work they do and who make the time to reflect on this
Keeping it positive

Maybe it’s because the word critical appears so often in reference to reflective practice (e.g., critically reflective practice, critical thinking, critical incident analysis) or maybe it’s because human services practitioners are criticized so heavily, after all, workers do have a tendency to focus on events which didn’t go so well when they are reflecting.

The danger of this, of course, is that the spotlight is always on what went badly. Little is learnt from the positive outcomes and what went well.

It is, of course, vital that we learn the lessons from mistakes and failures in systems. However, to ensure effective and holistic reflection, practitioners really need to balance the issues they reflect on so that reflection on positive practice takes place. This is important, not least to ensure that practitioners maintain the motivation for reflective practice.

Guidance on Developing Reflective Practice

- Keep a reflective journal
- Find a critical friend
- Work on critical incident analysis
- Try mind mapping
- Use a model that works for you
- Use supervision effectively
- Keep it positive

Developing reflective practice