Reflective Practice

Social Work Pocket Guides are designed to help busy practitioners get to the bottom of the what? why? and how? of the chosen subject. They summarise theory and research in an accessible way and offer specific practical suggestions for skill development.

Reflective practice is a key component of contemporary social work practice. This Guide explores what is meant by reflective practice and why it is important in social work as a profession. Recognising the need for students and practitioners to both develop their skills in reflective practice and to produce critically reflective assignments, a range of tips and guidelines are provided for the reader.

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It is generally agreed that reflective practice is an essential aspect of good practice in social work and increasingly in social care. 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?

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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, analyse, 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)
In exploring the following questions:
- Why is reflective practice important to social work?
- Why should social workers be reflective?
- Why do social workers find it difficult to be critically reflective?

This section should help you to identify why you need to be a reflective practitioner to be an effective social worker.
Why is reflective practice important to social work?

It is generally agreed that reflective practice is important in social work 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 social work 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 social work
- Service users deserve to work with practitioners who recognise the vital importance of the work they do and who make the time to reflect on this
Professionalism and Reflection

The ACCESS model of professionalism, as described by Dean (1995) demonstrates how reflection and professionalism are closely linked.

A – Autonomy linked with Accountability: Professionals have a level of autonomy which means that they do not need direction about every action they take. They do, however, need to be accountable for the decisions they make and the actions they take.

C – Commitment: Professionals have a level of commitment to their work – Dean describes the way that a professional should have an allegiance to the client (service user) and the profession.

C – Collegiate: Essentially this means that there should be a group identity within the profession. Considering the development of a college of social work demonstrates the move towards a collegiate sense in social work.

E – Education: A profession has an agreed body of knowledge which is passed on through extensive education. Through extensive education and subsequent continual professional training.

S – Service user driven: A professional is service user centred rather than focussed on themselves. Professional standards expressed in statements like codes of ethics set behavioural standards to maintain the user focus.

S – Skills: A professional has specialist skills and takes an interest in expanding their skills to ensure that they are up to date and fit for purpose. A professional also takes an interest in expanding knowledge and skills within the profession generally, recognising that professional practice can always be further developed.

I would argue that it would be impossible for someone to meet the six components of professionalism outlined in Dean’s model unless they were a reflective practitioner. Hence, part of being a professional social worker is being a reflective social worker.
Social Work as a Complex and Dynamic Profession

Social work is a complex profession. It is never static and the work which practitioners undertake is by no means mechanistic. It calls for people who are thoughtful and can respond to changing dynamics. Reflective practice is therefore an essential aspect of the profession. It is interesting to think of reflective practice in terms of the theatre. If a social worker was an actor they would not be able to follow an exact script, since people and their needs are complex and unpredictable. Any social work “actor” would need to be able to improvise and ad lib, which is only possible with a reflective approach.

Professional knowledge extends beyond simply mechanistic views of what is ‘known’, it extends to what is often referred to as ‘practice wisdom’. This means that professional knowledge involves some form of intuition, artistry, or what can be referred to as ‘inexpressible knowings’ (Hooper and Parrot 2006). This kind of professional artistry develops over time as each new professional extends the knowledge they gained through qualification by testing this out in their practice and reflecting on the experience. The development of this professional artistry is only possible where a practitioner is reflective about their practice.
This section of the pocket guide has demonstrated that there are many ‘answers’ to the question, why is reflective practice important in social work?

Perhaps most important though is the fact that reflective practice helps social workers to have a deeper understanding of themselves and their practice. This improves practice for the most important people engaged in social work – the users of the service.

**HOW?**

This section will cover some of the models of reflective practice to help the reader identify:

- How to be more reflective
- How to develop skills in reflective practice
- How to demonstrate reflective practice
- How to write in a critically reflective way

**HOW DO I DEVELOP AS A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER?**
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 social work is a profession which is criticised so heavily but social 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 etc. 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

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

Developing reflective practice
Critical Friends

First introduced by Stenhouse (1975) the idea of a critical friend is that they are a trusted listener, who acts as an interested sounding board. Stenhouse introduced the idea for action research, but it has since been extended as an idea which supports reflective practice. The critical friend in reflective practice is a person who will listen to the practitioner and ask provocative questions to prompt deeper thinking. The critical friend might use a framework like the coaching conversation (see page 37), or they might use a set of reflective questions such as those posed by McClure (see page 114 & 115).

The idea of the critical friend is very important in social work where confidentiality limits the opportunities for discussion about working practices with others.

There is a limit to what each of us can achieve unaided.
Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985: 36)

Research into the use of critical friends in medical education indicates that whilst having a critical friend is useful, it might be even more advantageous to be a critical friend to someone else in order to develop reflective practice skills (Dahlgren et al 2006). It might therefore be useful for social work practitioners to pair up as critical friends to one another – this regularly happens informally in social work teams, particularly where practitioners are undertaking further study.
Reflective Journals

Keeping a reflective journal can be very beneficial in developing skills in reflective practice. We're not talking here about something which is completed for academic purposes or something which is going to be assessed – by reflective journal I mean something more like a personal diary (used regularly). It doesn't need to be neat, the spellings and grammar aren't important. The process of jotting things down reflectively is what is important.

Some students might benefit from keeping an unstructured reflective journal as I have. By getting into a regular habit of writing for a few minutes without stopping, I have got a useful record of my own reflections and a way into the more formal writing I am expected to do as a student.

Sinclair (2006 : 23)

According to Richardson and Maltby (1995) keeping a reflective journal and getting into the habit of writing regularly promotes the following qualities and skills which are required for reflection:

- Open-mindedness
- Motivation
- Self awareness
- Description and observation
- Critical analysis and problem solving
- Synthesis and evaluation

The benefits of keeping an unstructured reflective journal can be maximised by reviewing it regularly for recurring themes. This can aid the development of more critical reflection.

Have you noticed how similar these skills are to the skills needed to be an effective social worker?