

The Social Work Pocket Guide to...

Reflective Practice

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Contents List...

What?

What is reflection?.....	8
What is reflective practice?	10
What is critical reflection?	11
What is reflexivity?	12
What are the origins of reflective practice?	14
Dewey's five states of thinking.....	17

Why?

Why is reflective practice important to social work?.....	20
Professionalism and reflection	22
Learning and reflection.....	26
Korthagen's reflective onion	42
Forms of reflection.....	44
Single loop and double loop learning.....	46
Improving practice	50
Practice learning and reflective practice	52
Ethics and reflective practice	54
Emotional intelligence and reflective practice.....	56
Why do social workers find reflective practice difficult?	58

How?

Keeping it positive	70
Critical friends.....	72
Reflective journals.....	74
Using a model.....	80
Schön	82
Johns.....	93
Boud, Keogh and Walker.....	94
Gibbs.....	96
Borton.....	98
Fook.....	100
Smyth.....	105
Transformative learning.....	106
Reflective writing	116

WHAT?

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?**

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)

What?

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 SOCIAL WORK
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE THROWS UP MANY POSSIBILITIES

WHY?

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 SO
IMPORTANT IN SOCIAL WORK?**

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

Why?

- 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

21

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.

Why?

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.

23

There has been a great deal of work in recent years on the development of a professional platform for social work. One of the most important aspects of being accepted as a profession is the existence of a clear knowledge base and the continual growth of knowledge. This means that professionals must be able to theorise from their own practice experiences, which is only possible through reflective practice.

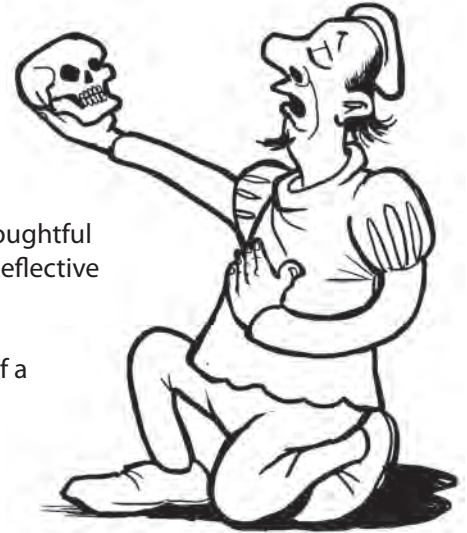
Professional knowledge extends beyond simply mechanistic views of what is 'known', it extends to what is often referred to as 'practice wisdom'. This means that professional knowledge involves some form of intuition, artistry, or what can be referred to as 'inexpressible knowings' (Hooper and Parrot 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.

practice wisdom
develops through
reflective
practice.

Why?

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.



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.

How?

Guidance on Developing Reflective Practice



71

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)

How?

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.



73

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)

How?

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

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

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.

75