

Title: Deepening our understanding of Reflective Practice in a Child Protection and Welfare context

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Abstract

This article aims to develop a deeper understanding of reflective practice (RP) in teams in the context of a systemic approach to child protection. It highlights the inherent dichotomy of reflective practice between the very private nature of reflection and its application to the public arena of professional practice. Six social workers in the London Borough of Ealing participated in semi-structured interviews based on their experience of the structures in place to facilitate team reflections, namely daily Morning Check-in (MC) and weekly Group Supervision (GS) meetings. Findings identified four key themes: first RP as a team learning activity; second, the challenge to provide emotional support through RP within the team, third, the time commitment and last the importance of team stability. The impact on social workers' ability to reflect in their teams is discussed using four dimensions of systemic practice; first, the use of 'self' in social work interventions; second, the 'mentalisation' of the child and their family; third, the 'team around the worker' support and fourth, practitioners' reflective learning. Much more needs to be understood to effectively accommodate the private process of RP within the reality of public organisational life.

Keywords: Reflective practice, critical reflection in child protection, reflective supervision, systemic practice.

Introduction

Reflection has been defined as the process of making sense of a situation using existing knowledge (Schon, 1983). Kolb (1984) shows how after an experience, reflection forms an essential part of the learning process. It is about making sense of the experience, adapting to different situations, including learning about oneself (Dewey, 1933). The concept of reflective practice (RP) represents the application of reflection to professional practice (Fook, 2015). In child protection, RP has become an essential part of the Social Worker's role as it deals with the emotions and messiness that relationship-based practice entails (Ruch, 2012). Reflective practice and critical reflection are sometimes used interchangeably. Mezirow (1991) defined critical reflection as the exploration through reflection of deeply held fundamental assumptions with a focus on how power operates.

A psychoanalytic approach highlights the unconscious emotional forces that can distort professional practice and it stresses the importance of regular reflection with others (Ferguson, 2018). This is particularly relevant in the emotive context of child protection in social work. The Department of Education's (2018) document states that the opportunity to engage and reflect on information held about a child and family is integral to good social work practice, which is supported by the Knowledge and Skills Standard (KSS) and the Performance Capability Framework (PCF) (British Association of Social Workers, 2018). The role of supervision is key to support individuals to reflect (Ruch, 2012).

The concept of self-reflexivity stresses the individual's agency in the dynamic process to "grasp an opportunity to...observe...listen to ...question the effects of their practice, then use their responses ...to decide 'how to go on'" (Burnham, 2005).

Systemic approaches to child protection recognises that human behaviour does not exist in isolation but in the context of its social environment (Cooper & Wren, 2012). They aim to understand the reasons for parents' or carers' unhelpful behaviours or attitudes (Sebba et.al., 2017). They embody the belief that we manufacture our own constructions of the world and that reality is not fixed but constructed in line with our preferred interpretation of situations and events (Hedges, 2010). Interpretations are reflections based on personal assumptions and therefore, practitioners must reflect continually on the basis for the judgements that influence their decision-making. As part of a systemic approach, organisations support practitioners to reflect on their experiences regularly through supervision and the creation of forums to facilitate this process (Bostock, et.al., 2017).

Team approaches encourage the individual to examine their assumptions in ways that they would not do otherwise (Fook, White & Gardner, 2006). However, the process of reflection in a group remains reliant on the individual's willingness to share their personal journey, background and previous experiences. Using a psychoanalytical lense, Ferguson (2018) shows that people are reluctant to let go of their deeply held beliefs. As an outcome of team RP, a person may come to question their own personal values. It may trigger an emotional response that would not be appropriate to address within the organisation environment (Fook, 2015).

Central to a systemic approach to safeguarding children in social work, RP serves four purposes, it: underpins relationship based practice (Ingram & Smith, 2018), ensuring that social workers are supported by their team in their relationship with children and their families (Ferguson, 2018); supports the team case supervision process (Bostock, et.al. 2017); provides relevant organisational input to mitigate risk and support decision making (Cameron et.al., 2016) and provides a useful platform for critical reflection and learning (Fook, 2002).

Ixer (2011) has argued that the concept of reflection is very broad and too vague to be usefully assessed. A managerialist approach to social work based on judgement calls on safeguarding situations with procedures in place to deal with unacceptable levels of risk (Munro, 2010) would agree with this viewpoint. Here, it is argued that reflection applied to professional practice, offers feedback to practitioners in four dimensions of the modern systemic constructivist approach to social work (McKeown, 2020). They are: social workers' **'use of self'** as agents for change in their relationship with the child and family (Ingram & Smith, 2018); their understanding of the family's perspective or **'mentalisation'** (Fonagy et.al., 2007); the **'team around the worker'** for emotional support and the development and implementation of interventions (Cross et.al.,2010) and the social workers' **learning from experience and self-reflexivity** (Burnham, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to develop a deeper understanding of RP in child protection teams within a modern approach to social work practice.

Research context

Since the acclaimed success of the Reclaiming Social Work programme in the London Borough of Hackney (Cross et.al., 2010), many Children and Families' Departments in England and Wales have developed a systemic approach to Child Protection (Sebba et.al., 2017), the London Borough of Ealing's Children Services being one of them. In 2014, following a successful bid to the Department for Education for an Innovation Fund, the approach to work with children in Ealing was reviewed and the Brighter Futures (BF) Intensive Engagement Model was developed with an emphasis on early help. Using a strength-based approach (Saleebey, 1996), the BF's model works on developing the positives within the family's and/or community's network (DfEducation, 2017).

Social workers act as representatives of the organisation to build a relationship with the family, becoming part of its environment and using their influence through direct work to bring about positive changes (Barlow with Scott, 2010). A team approach based on 'mentalisation' is used to support social workers to understand themselves and their service users' perspective (Bevington et.al., 2012). Mentalisation is defined as "a form of mostly pre-conscious imaginative mental activity, perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states" (Fonagy et.al., 2007, p.288), in other words "seeing oneself from the outside and others from the inside" (Fuggle et.al., 2015p.420).

Led by the team managers, the MC meetings invite social workers to meet with their teams first thing every morning for approximately thirty minutes to check-in about how each team member is feeling and to offer advice and/or support for those who may need it for action that day. The GS

meetings replace the one-to-one case supervisions between the worker and their manager. GS meetings typically take place weekly over three and a half hours, facilitated by the Deputy Team Managers, they include different social work professionals involved with the family - such as the virtual school teacher, clinical psychologist and supervising social worker - to share their observations. Following a structured approach, each case is presented by the relevant case holder and opened to questions and hypothesis by team members and other involved professionals. Over the course of a month, every case held in the team gets presented, different approaches and interventions are considered and agreed on jointly. Through the team's 'mentalisation' of the family, practitioners are encouraged to explore their values/beliefs (constructs) and impact on their day-to-day work. GS meetings also aim to support social workers in dealing with the emotional impact of the work.

The Brighter Futures (BF) model, including Morning Check-ins (MC) and Group Supervision (GS) was positively evaluated following a six-month pilot, conducted by two child protection teams who benefited from a protected caseload during this time. In the first author's experience as a social worker, ordinarily social workers are allocated cases on the basis that those cases need to be allocated with little consideration given to whether the individual has the capacity to deal with the volume of work entailed. During the pilot, team members selected to pilot the new way of working were given a protected number of cases meaning that if any additional cases needed to be allocated, they were allocated to workers who were not on the pilot. The BF model was formally launched as the new way of working in Ealing at the beginning of 2017 (Department for Education, 2017).

This paper aims to examine the dichotomies contained within the practice of reflection in professional teams from social workers' perspective.

Methodology

The assumed epistemological stance here is that reality is subjective and based on the perceiver's constructed personal experience and insight (Hedges, 2010). A qualitative methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is used to get an insight into social workers' experience of RP. An interview guide was developed to keep a consistent focus for all the interviews. The questions revolved around the participants' experience of the meetings as part of BF model and to find out what they found helpful and challenging. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2019 to allow participants to speak freely about their experience.

The thematic analysis of interview transcripts followed a deductive approach (Caulfield, 2019). This was done to understand what was working well for participants and what was not and why (Jensen

& Laurie, 2016). Semantic meanings - referred to in the language used by social workers - were used to place comments in different categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Latent meanings – implied in the responses given - were used to identify patterns of underlying thoughts/feelings and key themes were then identified.

Ethics and confidentiality

This study gained ethical approval from both the University of Hertfordshire and the London Borough of Ealing. Participants were advised that the interview would be recorded and transcribed and reminded that they could withdraw from the study before the final data analysis had been reached. Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect participants’ identity.

Participants

All participants worked in children service and had to have experienced the BF model since 2017, so they could compare it to how they worked before. Table one shows participant’s characteristics. Participants were approached personally, explained verbally the purpose of the study and recruited on a voluntary basis.

Name	Job title		Year of practice experience
	Deputy team manager	Social worker	
Mary	✓		14+
Jane		✓	14+ & part of BF pilot
Marcia		✓	16+
Nicole		✓	5+
Elvis		✓	4+
Kiran		✓	3+

Table one: Participants’ characteristics

Findings

Findings of the study show that MC and GS meetings are perceived to be a ‘source of learning from team reflection around practice’, there is a ‘blurred area around the sharing of personal views and emotional issues in a professional space’ and the recognition that reflective practice requires time commitment to create suitable social team conditions and therefore team stability.

Reflective Practice as a learning activity

Participants identified three aspects of reflective practice as a learning activity.

- First, they talked about learning through participation in the meetings, how hearing from other people's cases and experiences gave them ideas to incorporate into their own practice. Elvis (GS) talked about being supported to think through his plans from the child's and family's viewpoint, to reflect whether it was realistic to expect the family to be able to own and commit to it. He also spoke positively of the chance to 'prioritise together and think ahead' and the benefit of tapping into the background experience of others in the team with different insights and experiences, as "you're not always the best person to come up with a plan".

- Second, they all discussed how reflective practice enabled them to remain open minded and reconsider their interpretation of their cases. All participants felt that getting others' perspectives on their cases was a most valuable aspect of the GS meetings. All participants valued the input of other professionals taking part in the meeting such as the LAC psychologist and the virtual school teacher to help them mentalise the family. Marcia (GS) described the development of a joint approach with 'all the relevant people in the room' as 'a fantastic way of working'. She gave an example where a case previously stuck had been resolved through a 'truly strategic' intervention, which brought about positive outcomes. Participants acknowledged the importance of applying theoretical models in use, of remaining child-centred and how collective reflection supports anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice through the regular scrutiny of the GS meetings.

- Third, Jane and Elvis were the only participants who mentioned learning about themselves, as they opened up their perspective on cases to others' consideration. Jane (GS) commented:

- "I think it's really good when you talk about a case and your colleagues then make some reflection and feedback on what they've heard and what that might mean to them... what they understand of the situation can actually be quite useful because there might be some stuff that I didn't... wasn't aware of and I hadn't thought about."

Potential team support versus risk of sharing personal views in a professional space

All participants agreed with the usefulness of regular practical support and advice from the team to develop a sense of trust and a source of emotional support.

“...it’s a good opportunity to express how you’re feeling, if there is a service user who is coming in and you can’t face them this morning, another team member might volunteer to see them for you.” (Jane, MC).

Despite protestations that he doesn’t need support to deal with emotions triggered by work situations, Elvis described a situation when he became overwhelmed with emotion in a work context and his manager, present at the time, had provided support. This shows that even people who feel about managing their emotions can struggle to cope at times.

However, there were unequivocal reservations as to the appropriateness of disclosing too much ‘personal stuff’. Participants expressed strong feelings against personal views/emotions being shared in such professional settings. Comments explicitly stated that those meetings are not a space for ‘a therapy session’ or to resolve personal issues and that people should be ‘boundaried’ (perhaps alluding to an unspoken code of what can be talked about and what should not). Interestingly, there is no guidance as to what should/ should not be discussed in the meetings.

Participants responded differently to people sharing personal issues in reflection sessions. Mary (CS) said that:

“... I wouldn’t share my personal feelings. A lot of people feel the same (as me) but others would (share their personal feelings) and it can be difficult for others to handle that.”

Marcia (MC) acknowledged that sharing particular personal situations with her team, such as a bereavement when it was impacting on her at work, had been helpful. However, she spoke of “...going away heavy” when other people had disclosed their challenges.

Nicole (GS) said that when too many cases were discussed in one session, she would sometimes emerge from the meeting feeling overwhelmed, illustrating the toll that talking about and listening to many case concerns in a short period of time can have on practitioners.

While participants were positive about the opportunities to get together to discuss procedural work issues and/or request knowledge-based information, all were weary of the perceived risk of seeking personal emotional support in a professional setting. The fear of being criticised and the risk of being left exposed to others’ judgement could discourage participation in meetings. Participants mentioned ‘taking a risk’ when sharing situations that they struggled with or offering their personal

views in the context of GS discussions. Mary commented that, as a facilitator, she often had to intervene “to ensure that everyone’s needs were met”, suggesting that some people might make hurtful comments at others’ contributions. A distinction was made between asking for knowledge-based advice on work procedures and moving into ‘risky’ personal arenas.

Kiran commented: “... we can share work issues and get support from the team.” However, later she said: “... there’s not much to gain by saying how you feel. Others don’t care how you feel. Like I don’t want to sound negative but if I’m having a bad week, I don’t think anyone wants to hear that...”. None of the participants spoke about sharing the impact of the work situations on their emotional wellbeing, rather they would deal with the emotional impact of their cases themselves.

Time commitment and team stability

All participants felt that the time taken to prepare and participate in the meetings was an issue that required ‘more thought’ but their views and understanding of what to do about it differed widely. Nicole and Mary felt that there was value in permitting presenters to talk about their case for longer than the allocated time for case presentation within the established structure of the meeting, whilst Elvis, Kiran and Marcia felt that people should come prepared with succinct information needing to be shared for the discussion. Jane commented that people’s understanding of the purpose of the meetings varied and for her, this was the reason why the use of time was not always maximised.

There are differences in the understanding and expectation of how MC and GS support RP among participants, depending on the practice experiences and involvement in RP in team . This was illustrated by Jane’s comments:

“...because I was in the process right at the beginning...I see that things have kind of diluted and it’s not...it’s about new people learning things so ..., I was where some people are now a year or so ago so new people are learning ...and ...understanding this process is... that’s something that ... you know... might take different people different lengths of time...”.

All participants except Elvis, talked about needing to feel comfortable with people in the team, to share their views. Kiran and Mary said that not everybody was able to ‘reflect in that environment’ or ‘say what they thought in front of everyone’. Participants talked about how different people joining and leaving had affected their ability to feel comfortable in sharing issues.

Nicole (MC) articulated that “...you need to have that level of trust in your team in order to share how you feel.” Kiran (GS) mentioned “there’s got to be a relationship with the people in the team to do that (talking about reflecting)”.

Jane also talked about the uncertainty that re-structures engendered different groups of people forming the teams with a different manager and how this affected teamwork:

“because what they’ve done is ...they’ve changed it again... they’ve restructured a little bit and... it can be a bit messy... it brings on ...uncertainty and it’s different people coming together again ... to learn... and it brings on a bit of ... difference to how the process is ...”

Discussion

Findings of the study show the four dimensions of reflective practice relevant to systemic practice. They are reflection on ‘use of self’ as an agent for positive change, reflection on ‘mentalisation’ of the family and understanding of their perspective, reflection on the ‘team around the worker’ and reflection as a learning and development mechanism.

Reflection on the ‘use of self’

The importance of social workers’ understanding their interactions with service users and what they themselves bring to a situation is widely supported in the literature (Ingram & Smith, 2018). The depth to which participants reported reflecting on their ‘use of self’ in the meetings varied. On a ‘thinking level’, all participants felt that reflection supported their ability as social workers to explore potential for bias and to seek advice. They all considered this to be best practice in child protection (Bingle & Middleton, 2019). From a ‘feeling’ perspective, the use of supervision to provide emotional support is well illustrated in the literature (Ferguson, 2018). However here, participants’ expectations of the meetings related to help with applying procedures and/or knowledge and experience of situations rather than support linked to difficulties in coping emotionally with a particular situation.

Only two participants talked about reflective practice as a way of understanding themselves and the impact of their personal beliefs, background and assumptions on their casework. This is not being interpreted as an absence of this awareness from the other participants as many comments related to reasons for participants’ reluctance to express anything too personal in professional forums for fear of being criticised, of being judged and lack of time to explore ideas in the context of the timed meetings’ structure. There is a vulnerability in acknowledging even retrospectively that one struggled emotionally with a situation, which may be difficult to share (Molloy & Bearman, 2019).

Most participants in this study asserted that they were able to deal with emotions that came from the 'use of their self' in their interventions with children and families. Ingram & Smith (2018) acknowledge the tendency for professionals in the UK to separate their professional and personal 'selves' and this was strongly reflected in the comments made by the majority of participants in this study. Some of the language used suggested assumptions that the sharing of personal emotions in a work context is considered unprofessional.

The impact of intense emotions evoked in the relationship with service users affect social workers' ability to remain objective and to think rationally (Cooper, 2017). This was illustrated in Elvis' experience of being supported by his manager during an incident when he was overwhelmed with emotion. Ward (2010) suggests that effective social workers protect themselves from very high levels of anxiety through the creation of a 'defended self' overlapping their professional skills, a bit like a 'professional self' different from their 'personal self'.

The creation of this 'defended self' comes from the psychoanalytical theory that the self is developed through its relationship to anxiety. It starts from birth as infants' ability to deal with unbearable feelings rely on their carer's tuning into the infant's anguish and supporting the child to cope with distress through the provision of comfort and reassurance (Fonagy et.al., 2007). Bion (1962) called this process 'containment'. Ruch (2012) likened it to what should happen in supervision to support practitioners to deal with anxiety triggered by their exposure to difficult or emotional situations (BASW, 2018).

However, the 'defended self' cannot be fully reflected upon without reference to the 'personal self' that underlies it (Ferguson, 2018). The potential for practitioners to benefit from the 'containment' effect of the collective supervision process has to be supported through mitigation of the personal risks presented by making references to the 'personal self' in team meetings. Whether it is achievable to create sufficient 'trust' and 'safety' in social work teams in the context of continual change remains questionable. Indeed, in this study, team instability was referred to as an obstacle to people's ability to relate to others on a personal level.

Ixer (2016) suggests that reflection is about the application of personal values to work issues. To support social workers to reflect confidently in teams, the building of explicit shared values is therefore the starting point in the creation of 'trust' and 'safety' in the team environment. Shared values are built over time as illustrated in the literature on team dynamics in relation to organisational effectiveness (Dahlgaard-Park & Dahlgaard, 2006). Participants' ability to take personal risks in teams may need further investigation in relation to the level of trust that is possible to create in social work teams.

Reflection on 'mentalising the child and the family'.

All participants demonstrated a high level of awareness that their understanding of the family's perspective on their own difficulties was pivotal to the effectiveness of the plans derived to affect positive change for the child. As in other studies (Bostock et.al., 2017), all participants rated highly the input of the clinical psychologist in GS meetings as key to help them mentalise the family when making their assessments.

The process of reflection can be uncomfortable in an anxiety provoking environment such as child protection (Briggs, 2017). To remain curious, practitioners have to resist the urge to jump into action (Brighton & Hove City Council, 2017). The subject matter expertise that the clinicians bring to the table provides reassurance in the context of risk in child protection settings (Bostock et.al., 2017). It may support the 'containment' of the worker's emotions, enable the development of the 'internal supervisor' and the worker's capacity to reflect on action whilst in action and to simultaneously mentalise the service user's feelings and their own in the interaction (Ferguson, 2018).

Participants felt that the others' input in team discussion enabled an inclusive way to think about child and family issues and resulted in anti-oppressive reflections about the purpose and outcomes of social work interventions (Bostock et.al., 2017). However, most suggested that offering an honest opinion carried the risk of being judged/criticised and highlighted the importance of staying safe. Shared decision making can be problematic if team members do not genuinely feel able to bring their viewpoints to the table. The continuous fostering of a climate of trust and safety in teams can only encourage members' participation.

Reflection on the 'Team around the worker'

Participants welcomed other team member's input and discussions about their families' situations even balanced against the time taken to prepare and participate in the meetings. GS formalised discussions that would have taken place informally otherwise.

The comments made suggest that even though participants did not like sharing anything personal in the MC meetings, the experience of getting together daily and the opportunity to share helped the development of trust and team spirit. Cornish (2011) stresses the importance of social workers being presented with opportunities for reflection in a supportive team environment. This illustrates

the positive correlation between practitioners' feeling contained and their thinking ability to contribute to meetings.

Participants spoke positively about the helpfulness of GS to move cases on and the improved frequency of case oversight. However, all said that the time taken to prepare for GS and sit through the discussion of everyone's cases on a weekly basis presented a persistent challenge in the context of high workloads. To save time, several participants suggested that team members should 'come prepared' to the meeting having selected the information that they will present to the team. However, the case holder coming 'prepared', means that they will inevitably select information to present, which supports their own view (Schon, 1983). The emphasis on some aspects of the case and the omission of others can inadvertently affect the audience's perception of the whole picture.

From a postmodern social constructionist perspective, the task of presenting the child and family's circumstances assumes the worker's self-understanding of their own biases (Howe, 2009). In reality, the feelings evoked in the worker and his/her view of what is important will interfere with their selection of what is appropriate 'succinct and relevant' information. Therefore, allowing more time for the presentation and enabling the workers to express some of their own difficulties without too much preparation, may allow other team members to gain a less 'guarded' view of the case. Unless people feel unconditionally safe and supported, team member's ability to make use of the GS forum will be hindered, as workers may be reluctant to express what is actually bothering them about a case.

Views on the meetings' success in creating appropriate conditions for reflective practice varied significantly perhaps because not all participants felt that it was necessary to disclose personal views/values to effectively reflect in teams.

Participants had differing views as to whether the meeting structure should be adhered to rigidly to limit the time taken to complete all team discussions. This illustrates the difficulty to accommodate individual's needs, which supports the use of the meetings to develop the 'internal supervisor' (Cooper, 2017) versus the organisational imperatives to focus on the case and limit the use of time.

Reflection on 'reflective learning'

All participants acknowledged that the experience of reflecting with others on the practical aspects of their cases was useful. Learning from GS's discussions included being exposed to other team member's cases and different perspectives being shone on their own. Only one participant gave an example of self-reflexivity prompted by reflections which took place within one of the meetings.

This again highlights the differences between participants' views of what the meetings aim to achieve. The issue of personal risk already mentioned affected most participants' willingness to share issues honestly in the meetings and there was an awareness of the unease that such conversations evoked in others.

It is worth noting that the approach to reflection within systemic practice is challenging and complex given the accepting of the validity of different perspectives and the difficulties in balancing the merits of different viewpoints on a case, based on the premise that all viewpoints are defensible (Hedges, 2010). Jane, who had been part of the BF pilot and who had been trained probably more thoroughly and for the longest of the participants in this study makes reference to a 'learning journey' in her comments and different people being at different points in it. Such a different way of working may merit regular reviews and team discussions on how people are feeling as well as training updates, especially for those facilitating the meetings.

Conclusion

Participants in this study found RP beneficial in all four dimensions relevant to systemic practice. Positive comments focussed on team support around professional dilemmas, help with practical issues and learning from others' input into their cases. However, there was a strong reluctance to share personal views and/or emotions triggered by work situations. Most participants felt that too much openness on personal values and emotions in a work setting was 'risky' and undesirable. The importance of promoting a 'safe' organisational culture to invite openness and counteract factors identified above is paramount. It is not suggested here that every effort had not been made by the organisation concerned to promote a non-judgemental culture. Regardless of the values and ethics openly supported by an organisation, the reality of the culture is function of the lived experience of individuals (Senge, 1990). It could also be a function of people's expectations of what organisational life is about and all participants in this study appeared uncomfortable at the idea of sharing feelings and personal views in professional settings.

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